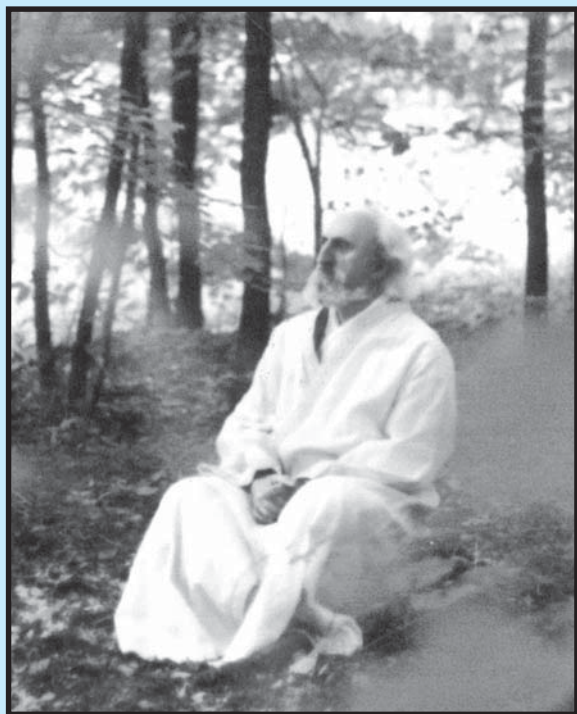


# FRITHJOF SCHUON

Life and Teachings



Jean-Baptiste Aymard and Patrick Laude  
*Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

FRITHJOF SCHUON

SUNY series in Western Esoteric Traditions  
David Appelbaum, editor

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*Life and Teachings*



JEAN-BAPTISTE AYMARD  
AND  
PATRICK LAUDE

*Foreword by  
Seyyed Hossein Nasr*

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## FRITHJOF SCHUON ROCK AND LIGHTNING

*The “Thunder-Bird” (Wakinyan-Tanka) whose abode is in the West, and who protects earth and its vegetation against drought and death, is said to flash lightning from its eyes and to thunder with its wings; the analogy with the Revelation on Mount Sinai, which was accompanied by “thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud” (Exodus, XIX 16), is all the more striking in that this Revelation took place on a rock, while in the Indian mythology it is precisely the “Rock” which is connected with the “Thunder-Bird” . . . . It might . . . seem surprising that the Indian tradition should establish a symbolical link between the “West Wind,” bearer of thunder and rain, and the “Rock” which is an “angelic” or “semi-divine” personification of a cosmic aspect of Wakan-Tanka; but this connection is admissible, for in the rock are united the same complementary aspects as in the storms: the terrible aspect by reason of its destructive hardness . . . , and the aspect of Grace through its giving birth to springs which, like rain, quench the thirst of the land.*

—Frithjof Schuon, *Language of the Self*

*. . . the Absolute—or consciousness of the Absolute—thus [in Islam] engenders in the soul the qualities of rock and lightning, the former being represented by the Kaaba, which is the center, and the latter by the sword of the holy war, which marks the periphery.*

—Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*

*Rock-like, the Indian of former times rested in his own being, his own personality, ready to translate it into action with the impetuosity of lightning.*

—Frithjof Schuon, *Lights on the Ancient Worlds*



# Contents

Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	1
1. A Biographical Approach	5
2. A Spiritual Portrait	55
3. Esoterism and Tradition	79
4. Metaphysical and Spiritual Aesthetics	107
Conclusion	127
Appendix 1: Frithjof Schuon: General Considerations on Spiritual Functions	129
Appendix 2: Frithjof Schuon: Christian Gnosis	133
Notes	137
Bibliography of Works by Frithjof Schuon	185
Index	191





## Foreword

Frithjof Schuon is without doubt one of the major intellectual and spiritual figures of the twentieth century and yet little is known about his life in the English-speaking world. During his lifetime, despite the wide dissemination of his writings in many languages throughout the world, he remained intentionally completely outside of the public limelight and was not easily accessible except to those in quest of spiritual guidance. Furthermore, those who knew him well respected his desire for privacy and did not write publicly about him. Now that he has left this world, however, it is time to make known the life and thought of this colossal figure who has exercised much influence in East and West already and whose works attract an ever greater number of seekers of the perennial wisdom or the *philosophia perennis* of which he was the foremost expositor in his day.

To understand the importance of Schuon one must turn one's attention to the innate significance of his timeless message as well as to the timeliness of his oeuvre, which comes at a particularly significant moment in both the process of intellectual and spiritual awakening among a number of people in the West and the revival of traditional metaphysics and authentic esoterism in Europe after a long period of having been eclipsed. To comprehend the timeless quality of the Schuonian message, it is sufficient to turn with an open mind and heart to his writings. In this foreword, therefore, we shall leave that question aside and turn to the aspect of the timeliness of his message and his historical role in the revival of perennial wisdom.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time which saw the greatest spiritual eclipse in the West from the point of view of traditional wisdom, those drawn to the study of the inner meaning of things, to authentic metaphysics and esoterism, found themselves in a mental landscape wherein the choices in mainstream culture were between a completely externalized form of religion, a rationalistic and positivist philosophy, or a secularized science. Where were such seekers to find the *scientia sacra* of the days of old? Such people often turned to occultist and pseudoesoteric movements. This was the era of

Eliphas Lévi and Papus, of Mme Blavatsky and Annie Besant. A phenomenon had appeared that was unique to the modern West, namely the rise of occultism, which was then mistaken for authentic esoterism. Occultism in the West, which starts with the modern period, produced figures, influences, and forces which ranged from the quaint and the eccentric to the outright spiritually subversive and dangerous, and yet it drew to its fold many seekers who had nowhere else to go.

In the second and third decades of the twentieth century a major transformation occurred with the appearance in France of René Guénon, who had himself been associated with many of these occultist circles in his youth. Through direct contact with spiritual authorities from the East as well as through his own God-given metaphysical intelligence, Guénon was able to clear the ground of the errors of the day and build the edifice of authentic metaphysics and esoterism on the soil of the Occident. Although he spent the last twenty years of his life in Cairo, where he had lived openly as a Muslim and where he is buried, he continued to write in French for a Western audience until his death in 1951.

In the 1920s the prodigious scholar of Indian art and culture, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, came to know of Guénon, embraced the traditional perspective, and corresponded with him until his own death in 1947. Coomaraswamy had an in-depth knowledge of a dozen languages and was an unparalleled authority on Oriental art and a master expositor of the Hindu and Buddhist religions in all their dimensions and diverse manifestations. He was also deeply versed in the intellectual and artistic traditions of the West. Like Guénon, he sought to revive authentic metaphysics and esoterism by having recourse to the still existing and viable centers of wisdom in the Orient. Also like Guénon, he defended tradition against the onslaught of modernism and championed the cause of the *philosophia perennis* whose various formulations in the East and West he knew so well and about which he wrote eloquently in his numerous writings.

When Schuon began to write in the early 1930s, these two intellectual giants, Guénon and Coomaraswamy, had already composed many works, the former in French and the latter primarily in English, wherein the primacy of tradition, the critique of modernism, the exposition of metaphysics and authentic esoterism, the meaning of sacred symbols, and the sacred arts and sciences of various traditional civilizations had been expressed with great clarity and authority. Schuon's writings were like the seal of this corpus of works. He both complemented and completed the message of those masters who had gone before him. Moreover, Schuon emphasized the operative and practical aspects of the realization of the truth along with theoretical metaphysics and cosmology. He spoke not only of the *philosophia perennis*, or *sophia perennis*, but also of *religio perennis*. His message brought out more than the writings of Guénon and Coomaraswamy the central significance of religion and the truth that esoterism and traditional metaphysics can only be realized within the framework of

revealed religions. Like his predecessors, he also wrote about the universality and unity of the truth and coined the term “transcendent unity of religions,” which is the title of his first work in French and which has now become famous in the study of religion even in academic settings. Well-known scholars of religion ranging from R. C. Zaehner, who opposed his views, to Huston Smith, who embraced them completely, made him known in academic circles concerned with the study of religion.

Schuon’s works, as well as the way he lived his life, put an end once and for all to the confusion between the occult and the authentically esoteric and brought out the real significance of esoterism, as one sees in one of his masterpieces, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*. Schuon also lived the life of religion and walked the esoteric path until he attained the Truth. He was himself a spiritual master, the head of a Sufi order, and spoke with the authority of one who had experienced the Truth directly. That is why works on his life, if authentic, can be so valuable not only in making better known the biography of a major spiritual and intellectual figure with global influence, but also in making more understandable many aspects of his message, especially his insistence upon spiritual practice and his attraction to certain types of spiritual forms.

One could of course embark upon the task of writing such a biography by studying various public documents, sifting their relative value, and constructing an ordinary scholarly portrait of the man. Surely such works will appear in the future. But for now, when we are still close to the time of Schuon’s death and when there are a number of people who knew him personally and have access to direct sources concerning his life and thought, it is important to encourage biographies written from the perspective of such figures. Of course such writers would not be objective bystanders but would represent what we might call the “view from within.” Such works, however, are not to be seen as lacking objectivity and being just subjective appraisals, but can in fact become themselves primary sources for those who will undertake ordinary historical and scholarly biographical studies in the future.

The two authors of this work are not only among those who knew Schuon personally and view him with great respect and reverence, but they are also scholars well versed in dealing with scholarly material. They are already responsible as either authors or editors for several important biographical and intellectual studies of Schuon in French. Their personal positions and contacts have enabled them to gain access to many documents not available publicly and to be able to interview a number of key figures who knew Schuon intimately over many years, including his widow Catherine Schuon. Their study combines personal devotion to their subject with extensive knowledge drawn from both oral and written sources not generally available, not to speak of intimate knowledge of his works. Of course being the colossal intellectual and spiritual figure that he was, Schuon was a person about whom there cannot be just one interpretation

concerning his teachings and even about certain seminal events of his life. As we also see in the diverse interpretations of the life and teachings of many sages of old, certain interpretations of the authors of this work may in fact be debated and contested. Nevertheless, the present study remains a valuable document in that it is based on firsthand knowledge of Schuon's life and thought transmitted both orally and in writing.

The authors of this work are to be congratulated for having produced this important introduction to the life, works, and thought of the premier authority on perennial and primordial wisdom during the second half of the twentieth century. This work is bound to guide many readers to the writings of the master, writings which he considered as his main heritage to the general public, to be studied without concern about the life of the man who had authored them. But this book is also an important depiction of Schuon as a person and contains a sketch of the life which made such a remarkable body of works possible. Today this book may be taken as a major secondary source for the study of Schuon. In the future years it will most likely become among the primary sources, based as it is to such a large extent on firsthand oral and written witnesses to the life and works of one of the most remarkable intellectual and spiritual luminaries of the past century.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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## Introduction

As a rich corpus of metaphysics and spiritual teachings, Frithjof Schuon's writings provide reflective and circumstantiated answers to the questions of modern man, who today finds himself disarmed in the face of the all-conquering certitudes of science, and the prevailing relativism. However, Schuon was not a bookish metaphysician but first and foremost a man of inspired meditation and prayer, and, to borrow the expression he used with regard to René Guénon, a "born gnostic" who tended to actualize all the wealth of his inner being in his philosophical and artistic output. As such, Schuon cannot be identified as "belonging" to any given religion since his perspective is fundamentally supra-confessional, esoteric, and universalist.

As much in his everyday comportment as in his reflexes, Schuon seemed from more than one point of view like a man of another time. Born into an ambience still linked to the nineteenth century, and dying at the dawn of the twenty-first, he remained, all his life, true to his principles, indifferent to the fashions of the age, and thereby often misunderstood and isolated.

Fundamentally, Schuon's works constitute a synthesis that not only reconciles the various creeds and wisdoms of the world from the standpoint of "colorless" wisdom, but also points to a way of realizing this wisdom here and now through an intellectual, volitive, and animic conformity to the Real and to the nature of things. Let us add that the "colorless" wisdom Schuon has had in view is of a much more essential nature than the applications to which it may give rise on the level of comparative religion; Schuon was certainly a brilliant comparatist, but those who had the privilege of his contact considered him above all a genuine gnostic. Be that as it may, just as the Divine Mercy must sometimes appear in the form of Rigor, within the realm of relativity—insofar as the latter is nothing but an illusory negation of the Absolute—in the same way, through his books, Schuon's generous gift of understanding finds a complement in the



rigor of a form that protects its substance, guarding it against distorting or debasing simplifications while testing the sincerity and resolve of the reader, and the intensity of his thirst for truth.

In his introduction to *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Huston Smith noted, “[T]here appears to be something about Schuon’s entire approach to the relation between religions that, being foreign to the contemporary theological scene . . . renders it peculiarly difficult of access.” Whether it be a matter of approach or one of conceptual language, it is a fact that Frithjof Schuon’s works have the reputation of being difficult. It could be asserted, however, that this difficulty is less inherent in the substance of Schuon’s books and in their dialectics—notwithstanding the mystery of the Divine, the complexities of the human predicament, and the ransom of the inexpressible—than it is a perception resulting from a lack of metaphysical and philosophical training on the part of many modern readers, when it is not a manifestation of intellectual passivity. More subtly, this reputation of difficulty might even be a facile pretext to discard Schuon’s works or to minimize their impact—or at least that of their most esoteric dimension—by burying them under the heap of other perennialist works which, albeit valuable and insightful in their own right, are in fact of a lesser scope or a lesser depth of spiritual vision than Schuon’s opus, if not much indebted to it. To the objection that his works are too difficult, Schuon has himself retorted that his works are “no more difficult of approach than the average works of profane philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> In this connection, it should be added that the relative level of difficulty of Schuon’s works is a function of the complexity of Reality and not in the least the effect of a conceptual virtuosity nor a form of intellectual “art for art’s sake.”

The esoteric approach—in the sense of an inner reading of sacred forms that, far from casting them aside, illuminates them in light of their essence—allows Schuon to provide the reader with an enlightening phenomenology of religions which takes him to the metaphysical core of the various creeds.

Let us specify that the pages that follow should not to be construed as an attempt at providing an exclusive interpretation of Schuon’s writings, nor should they be considered as an apologetic defense of his metaphysical and spiritual opus. Schuon’s works defend themselves on their own ground, and they certainly do not need to be completed nor perfected by any commentators or epigones.

Our approach is twofold: biographical and doctrinal. These two elements should be understood in light of the Chinese yin/yang symbol of interrelatedness rather than in an exclusive manner. Schuon’s life cannot be severed from his metaphysical doctrine, and his doctrine was as if confirmed and illustrated by his life. Although chapter 1 and 2 of this book tend to emphasize a historical approach, they do so while connecting the major traits of Schuon’s personality and the main events of his life to the core of his teachings. Conversely, while chapters 3 and 4 delve into some fundamentals of Schuon’s doctrine, they also

touch upon the spiritual and aesthetic concomitances of Schuon's destiny and personality.

In writing these pages, our fundamental objective was simply to reformulate a certain number of ideas established by Schuon, to explicate some aspects of his works that may have been neglected or possibly misunderstood. Repetition and explication are after all quite valid and traditional modes of assimilation, quite independently from any ambition to convince or convert our reader. As Schuon himself has stated, "we do not seek to convert anyone who is at peace with God." It may simply be a matter of reawakening in some, presumably those increasingly rare seekers who "have eyes to see and ears to hear," a perception of reality according to the nature of things that may be the starting point of an aspiration toward spiritual centering.



## CHAPTER ONE

### A Biographical Approach

*He is one who speaks from the experience of what he has seen,  
And this makes all the difference.  
The celestial rider has passed by;  
The dust has risen into the air,  
He has hastened on, but the dust he has raised  
Is still there, in suspense—  
Look straight in front of thee;  
Let thy gaze deviate neither to the right nor to the left;  
The dust is here, and he  
Is in the Infinite.*

—Rûmî, *Rubâ'iyat*

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Schuon family, of Germanic origin but of Valaisan stock, had been living in Basel for some years. Paul Schuon, whose parents were Swabian, first emigrated to Alsace, after it had become German in 1870, following the Franco-Prussian war. There he married Margarete Boehler, who was Alsatian on her mother's side, but whose father was originally from the Rhineland. They had two sons. The first, Erich, born on April 26, 1906, was to become many years later a Trappist monk under the name Father Gall. The second, Frithjof, was born on June 18, 1907.<sup>1</sup>

A violinist and a professor at the Basel Conservatory, Paul Schuon had formed a friendship during a concert he gave in Oslo with a ship's captain named Frithjof Thorsen; it was to the remembrance of this friendship that his second son owed his unusual name from the land of fjords.<sup>2</sup>

The Schuon brothers spent the best part of their childhood in Basel, a "fairy-tale city," as Frithjof later said in deep appreciation of the romanticism of this city on the edge of German Switzerland. As a child he liked to walk in the



*Frithjof Schuon as a child in Basel, 1916. Personal collection, Catherine Schuon.*

old, melancholic streets, stroll along the Rhine, and dream, alone or with friends, on the *Pfalz* which overlooked it.

Germanic to the core, and speaking at this time only German, Schuon was impregnated from childhood by that poetic and mystical culture whose particular expression in fairy tales and traditional melodies he never forgot. It was also because his father liked to play the violin like a gypsy that this music always had a nostalgic attraction for Schuon. His sensibility led him quite naturally in the direction of German romanticism, "nurtured by the Middle Ages, at once chivalrous, enchanted and mystical." "Doubtless," he wrote in a letter to his friend Hans Kürz, "many children of that era—it was, as it were, the end of the nineteenth century—breathed that same air." Very early he read Goethe and Schiller, then later Heine and many others; but his father's library contained treasures of another kind. A gifted musician and an occasional poet, Paul Schuon was an amiable and distinguished man, a dreamer, naturally aristocratic and mystical in his fashion, sensitive to the atmosphere of Islam and India of old. And this is how the young Frithjof was able to find, among his father's books, the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*, which enchanted this twelve-year-old, the *Quran*, the *Vedas*, and also the *Arabian Nights*, which his father read to the family in the evenings.

Even though his parents, who were of Catholic origin, were not expressly practicing, Schuon was brought up in a profoundly religious atmosphere, and as a young child he was sent to Evangelical catechism,<sup>3</sup> where the "simple and intense piety of this first teacher" made a singular impression on him. This pious Lutheran was indeed able to inculcate in him biblical principles, and to introduce him to the world of Abraham and the *Psalms*. He said much later of the predominant Lutheranism of his childhood, "It cannot be pure heresy. . . . Its priorities are simplicity, inwardness and trust in God; nothing else touched me in my early childhood" (letter to Hans Kürz, November 17, 1982).

Schuon sought from his youth onwards to find consolation in sacred art and prayer. An introvert, he felt like a stranger, misunderstood by those around him. His profoundly artistic nature<sup>4</sup> and his taste for the authentic led him to look in museums for the traces of past wisdom which seemed to him like windows opening onto a lost world. "I could spend hours visually assimilating the messages of the traditional worlds. For me visual assimilation came before conceptual assimilation" (Letter to Marco Pallis, June 8, 1982).

Thus it was that in 1919, when he was barely twelve, he discovered with wonder, in the Museum of Ethnography in Basel, three Buddhist statues whose closed eyes and sacred gestures filled him with emotion. Much later, he wrote, "Our first encounter, intense and unforgettable, with Buddhism and the Far East, took place in our childhood in the presence of a large Japanese Buddha of gilded wood, flanked by two statues of Kwannon. Suddenly confronted with this vision of majesty and mystery, we might well have paraphrased Caesar, and exclaimed: *Veni, vidi, victus sum*" (I came, I saw, I was conquered).<sup>5</sup>

An adolescent out of the ordinary, confronted with the profanity and absurdity of the world and the ugliness of evil—the war of 1914 began when he was only seven—and with growing incomprehension on the part of most of his entourage, he became absorbed in his dreams and aspired, as he then wrote, to “the Essential, the Sacred, the Beautiful, and the Great.”

Everything in his tastes and in his comportment distinguished him from his schoolmates with whom, however, he was happy to associate. Moreover, his loyalty as a friend was a characteristic of his sensibility. His early friends always remembered his dignity as a child, which was calm and without ostentation. “Dignity is the ontological consciousness that the individual has of his supra-individual reality,” he wrote later in *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, and he added, “[D]ignity is the ontological awareness an individual has of his supra-individual reality.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, Schuon always kept this aristocratic bearing, this natural and unaffected dignity specific to many great spiritual beings.

He grasped at a very young age the principles that were to constitute the essence of his future metaphysical standpoint. It may be that the notion of the “transcendent unity of religions” was evoked in him one day when, walking in the Zoological Gardens in Basel with Lucy von Dechend,<sup>7</sup> he met an elderly Senegalese marabout, with whom he conversed for a moment. The marabout, in order to make himself better understood, drew in the sand a circle with radii and added, pointing at the center, “God is the Center, all paths lead to Him.”

It was also at this time that he met at school someone who was to become his best friend and also one of the greatest writers of the traditionalist school of this century: Titus Burckhardt. Both excellent draftsmen, they sometimes tried to rival each other in skill and imagination, illustrating the Greek heroic legends or other traditional subjects. One year younger than Schuon, Burckhardt—born in Florence, but whose family was from Basel—was the son of the sculptor Carl Burckhardt and the great-nephew of the famous art historian, Jakob Burckhardt. Schuon described his first meeting with his future friend in these terms:

It was in the music room at school: the teacher asked each of us to sing a song we had learned at primary school. Up stood little Burckhardt and, in his boyish, piercing voice, sang the song of Winkelried. I saw him in profile: he had long blonde hair, and he sang so loudly that the teacher was astonished. This scene for me is unforgettable. I too was a singer when I was a child, as I had to sing in the St. Matthew Passion in the Basel Cathedral. The brahmanical side of Titus Burckhardt emerged later, when he was an adult. As a child he was half fighter, half dreamer; this dreaming was the prelude to his subsequent contemplative. (letter to Hans Küry, March 14, 1984)

However, their real friendship began only many years later, in 1932, when they met again in Riehen (a district in Basel) in the house of Lucy von Dechend, after each had separately undertaken spiritual initiatives which brought them together once again. Their friendship lasted until Titus Burckhardt's death in 1984.

What was precious about Titus Burckhardt's personality was the combination of an extraordinarily penetrating and profound intelligence with a great artistic talent; since he could not be a creative artist—and it was his good fortune that he was prevented from being one—his talent was put entirely into the service of the spiritual life; even more so in that he was at the same time very gifted for mystical contemplation. . . . He had in him an eternal youthfulness, something as it were liberating; one never felt constricted in his presence. He certainly did not lack a sense of humor and he also had a sense of adventure; he was enterprising and knew how to adapt to circumstances. From another point of view he had a good heart and a childlike candor and transparency. I can add that he was an excellent writer: we all know that. (letter to Hans Küry, January 21, 1984)



Schuon was thirteen when he lost his father in 1920. This death left Erich and Frithjof desolate. In Paul Schuon, they lost the person who understood them best, and with whom they had had most affinity. What is more, their mother chose to return to her family in Mulhouse, her hometown in Alsace, which had reverted to France. The two brothers had great difficulty accepting this change of country, atmosphere, and language. Entering clumsily into a period of conflict with her children, Margarete Schuon—whose financial situation was precarious, to say the least—wanted henceforth to make them “good little Frenchmen” and dreamed of their acquiring social success and of becoming respectable bourgeois. In fact, Frithjof got along well only with his mother's half-sister, Hélène. His mother and grandmother tried to make him wear hats and ties, which he detested, so little did he feel in himself the soul of a little bourgeois. Unhappy and nostalgic, he found refuge in poetry and wrote many poems which already provided a glimpse of his unquenchable thirst for the Absolute.

Shortly before his death, Paul Schuon had encouraged his sons to embrace the Catholic faith, but while Erich decided quickly, Frithjof did not decide until a year later. In reality, he was very happy to find in Catholicism the practice of the rosary and the veneration of the Holy Virgin who was, so to speak, the answer to an aspiration expressed in one of his childhood poems written in 1920:



Trägt mich Dein sanfter Arm zu Dir empor?  
 Senkt sich Dein Mantel stumm zu mir herab?  
 Ich schaue andachtsvoll Dein frommes All;  
 Ich gehe auf im Dufte Deiner Seele.  
 Du öffnest meinen Sinnen sanft ein Tor;  
 ein milder Glaube rieselt lind herab.

(Doth thy velvet arm raise me to thee?  
 Doth thy mantle silently descend on me?  
 Devotedly I contemplate thy holy all;  
 I dissolve and blossom in the perfume of thy soul.  
 Tenderly thou openest a door to my heart,  
 a peaceful faith gently ripples down.)

Baptized and then confirmed at the age of fourteen, he received the Catholic names François and Joseph. Of Protestantism and Catholicism he later wrote, "I experienced both forms of faith inwardly, and consequently I experienced, beyond all theology, their respective relationships to God. . . . In both camps I met precious people" (letter to Hans Kürz, August 7, 1982).

Nevertheless, he soon ceased all outward practice. His discomfort ("I felt like an awkward stranger"), his feeling of dissatisfaction, and his melancholy tinged with romanticism caused him to see the world in its negative aspect. Everything seemed to him petty, mediocre, or ugly.

In 1923, when his brother<sup>8</sup> entered the seminary, Frithjof, aged sixteen, had to leave school to provide for the needs of the family, and he became a textile designer. He immersed himself in Plato and the philosophers, but above all he read and reread the Bhagavad Gîtâ. "For about ten years I was completely spell-bound by Hinduism, without however being able to be a Hindu in the literal sense. . . . I lived no other religion but that of the Vedânta and the *Bhagavad Gita*; this was my first experience of the *religio perennis*" (letter to Leo Schaya, August 11, 1982).

He was in fact interested in everything connected with the Orient, particularly India. One day in 1924 Lucy von Dechend gave him a newspaper cutting referring to a book, *East and West*, by a certain René Guénon. Schuon found in this book everything that he had already felt by intuition. Thereafter he enthusiastically read *Man and his Becoming according to the Vedânta*, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, and, when it was published in 1927, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, all of which confirmed his rejection of the modern world. He saw in Guénon "the profound and powerful theoretician of all that he loved," but he did not yet know what this encounter would entail for him and many others.

At no time, even in his youth, did Schuon allow himself to be tempted by occultism, with its artificial and syncretistic language, its weird babble, and its so-

called great initiates. His own discourse was rather of a mystical nature and in his intimate diary one sees a great melancholy, a feeling of irrepressible solitude, a nostalgia for the Eternal Feminine, an unutterable aspiration toward the Beautiful and the Sovereign Good. "My every step touched the earth with a tender feeling of *Tat twam asi*. . . . In the Cathedral I prayed before the Madonna 'im Rosenhag' (in the hedge of roses). An impressive requiem mass was being sung—wonderfully liberating, noble, and serene in suffering—as the organ sobbed to the exultant bells."<sup>9</sup> He also wrote, in 1924, "The nature of the higher ego, in which the noble man must be consumed, is feminine: he must be consumed in the Eternal Feminine, just as woman must be consumed in the Eternal Masculine" (1924).

When he was sixteen he also noted, "I await my inner rebirth."

### EX ORIENTE LUX

At the age of twenty-one, Schuon left to do his military service for eighteen months. He was assigned to Besançon as a military orderly, which resulted among other things in his taking care of the horses. This position had some advantages, especially that of being permitted to have a beard and the possibility of going out of the barracks in the evening. He used his moments of freedom to climb up to the caves of Mt. Brégille, one of the seven hills in the area, in order to meditate or to read. In the barracks, he fraternized with North Africans, with whom he felt more affinity than he did with his other brothers-in-arms. It is doubtless as a result of these contacts that he began to have the wish to learn Arabic and the temptation to go to Yemen or some Oriental oasis. In one of his letters he quotes, in Romanian, the nostalgic words sung by a gypsy in his barrack room, who accompanied himself on the violin. In another letter, written at that time to his friend Johann Jakob Jenny, he says: "When I first came to the barracks, I fell into a lot of Slavic trivialities" (he had been reading the Russian classics). He continued:

I tried to console myself with cupfuls of sweet coffee, I stroked the horses and talked to them, I wandered about restlessly in the rain, I tried to speak Arabic with the Moroccans, and thought of far-away cities and people, until a sudden clarity would sweep over me and, closing my eyes, I would remember a golden silence and become river, rhythm, ocean again. At the same time many anxieties fell away, the path before me became free and existence lighter. . . . Night is falling and I would like to close my eyes and return home. I can tell you that I had never understood your love of the Alps as well as I do these days; but it is my Master's will that I should be deprived of their cool enchantment.

And in the form of a postscript he asks, showing his growing interest in Islam, "Could you tell me how much the paperback edition of Kröner's Quran costs?" (letter of October 1928).

Schuon wrote in German, in Gothic script, in a close, dense handwriting almost without margins. He wrote mostly to his friends Johann Jakob Jenny and Albert Oesch, and confided in them his reflections on religion, language, morals, poetry, authors, the soul, the virtues, and the modern world. He even wrote for them a long doctrinal dissertation on the Vedânta and the books of Guénon. There are passages in some of these letters that are particularly striking:

There are hours whose messages touch us more deeply than words that one's overly light brain is able to grasp. . . . The day before yesterday, in the evening, one of my companions threw himself out of the window. . . . Seeing his body covered with blood, I thought of everything which, like orchids, flowers in the minds of young people, and how our joys and sorrows are a terrifying and even despicable nothingness, and how egocentric, and without compassion, our dreams are: faced with the simplest facts of human life and death, they can only crumble, as if carried away by the breath of an infinitely severe silence. . . . We are encircled by death. Nothing is born that is not destined to die; life seems to be a proliferation, a trifle, an absurdity or a weakness—everything sinks into death; death alone is of consequence and is victorious. . . . Death is an expression of Being or a facet of Reality; the "now" is another. This "now" is everything; may we take hold of it! When we die we look at the world from the point of view of a single present which compensates for our existence and absorbs it into the Immutable. (letter of November 9, 1929)

After his military service and in the wake of the economic crisis of 1929, Schuon moved to Paris, where he found work as a textile designer. His financial situation was still precarious but he was quite indifferent to this. Though he detested the district of the Bourse where he lodged, he unquestionably loved Paris itself ("the love of my youth"), with its rich past and its old streets around Notre-Dame, the Île de la Cité, and the Luxembourg Gardens. He learned Arabic from a Jewish friend and took courses at the Mosque, but did not yet seriously imagine entering Islam, despite his obvious interest.

Nevertheless, on a visit to the International Exhibition at Vincennes in 1931, he felt a very strong presentiment of his destiny as he stood in front of a replica of the great Temple of Angkor Wat; and in the notes he wrote at the time there is a sign of a great inward agony:

I have to stammer out the Name of the Eternal and close my eyes. I wanted to make peace with the world and with myself, and to repose

in a sweet and sun-filled illusion, until an invisible sword would come and destroy the dream. . . . I am still filled with the tender pain of a vanished world; O that I might be consumed and made ready for the challenge that has now suddenly burst upon me! The West seeks to extinguish my spirit and steal my heart. I want to give both of them back to God, even if only in death. My heart wounds me, I must tear it out and throw it from myself. I must be melted down and recast. Thy Will, not mine, be done, O Lord. (1931)

In a letter to Jenny (April 9, 1931), which he surmounts with a very traditional *Bismillâh al-Rahmân al-Rahîm* (In the Name of God, the Clement, the Merciful) written in Arabic, he explains in French, which he has evidently not yet fully mastered:

One Tuesday evening, on returning home after speaking with Guénon's publisher, to whom I handed a letter for the master, I found your message which I had expected. Guénon is in fact in Cairo,<sup>10</sup> and even if he had been in Paris, one wonders if it would have been possible to see him. I cannot say that the simple fact of living in Paris, especially in circumstances as difficult as those of my present existence, constitutes pure happiness.

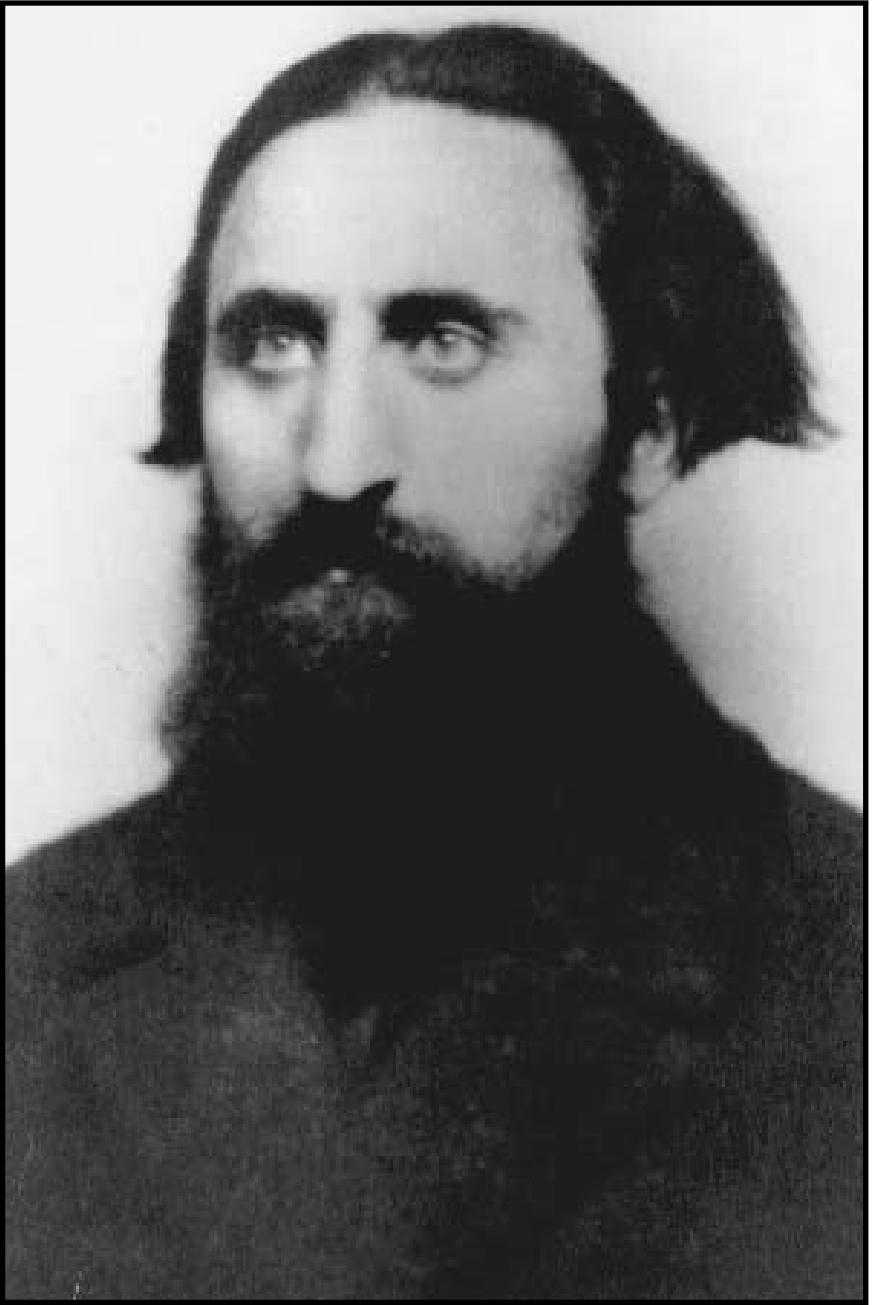
In his first letter to René Guénon he had written, amongst other things:

You have several times mentioned in your books the possibility of a restoration of Western mentality, of a return to a traditional civilization, and of a meeting between East and West; and on the other hand, you have spoken of the necessity for the truly intellectual elements in the West to become conscious of themselves through a knowledge of principles, whatever may be the ultimate solution to modern anarchy. (letter of April 1931)

And he adds a little further, "Is it not to be feared that those best qualified to cooperate in the restoring of Western intellectuality might all too easily be absorbed by the East which has cast its light on them, however indirectly?"

On June 5, 1931, Guénon replied courteously:

I am sorry to have been so long in replying to your letter, which I read with much interest, and in thanking you for your kind remarks, which are really too laudatory in my regard: for, basically, my only merit is to have expressed to the best of my ability certain traditional ideas. . . . As to the constitution of a Western élite, it is certain that only those who have a Western *mind* can be a part of it, and this is not the case of



*Schuon in Paris, 1932. Personal collection, Catherine Schuon.*

those who, as you say, may have been absorbed by the East, which is indeed a possibility; and there is not only the question of birth to be considered, especially in an era in which no one and nothing are any longer in their rightful place. As for adherence to an Eastern tradition, it is clear that not only is Islam the form least removed from the West, but it is also the only one for which the question of origin does not arise and is not an obstacle. . . . You say that French is not your language and even that you have only recently acquired a knowledge of it; in this case, allow me to congratulate you on the way you write. Would it be indiscreet to ask where you come from?

A few months later, Schuon wrote to his friend Jenny, "Islam is looking at me with its golden eyes; am I going to plunge into it without return, exhausted by my resistance to the vile atmosphere that gnaws at me like poison? Everything depends on the Will of God." He asks after various friends, mentions the arrival of Albert Oesch the previous month, asks Jenny to pass on his best regards to Ernst Küry, and explains, "I always express aspects of doctrine in aphorisms<sup>11</sup>—though they are perhaps too long to be called such—or in 'sutras,' in German, unfortunately, since I do not know Latin and I do have a command of German, which is not the case for French. . . . For speaking, the best European language is Italian; for writing, Latin. With a language like German, in which there are hardly any words with a definite meaning, there is nothing to be done without complications and lyricism" (letter of November 15, 1931).

The Arabic formulas he used, however, and his Arabic calligraphy, show that he was acquiring an ever better mastery of the Arabic language.

On December 22, 1931, he received another letter from Guénon: "I too am increasingly convinced that the forms of Christianity, as at present constituted, are unable to provide an effective support for the restoration of the traditional spirit. I had previously envisaged this mainly so that I could not be reproached for having neglected some possibility."

On February 20, 1932, Schuon wrote to Jenny, "I have suddenly lost my job. . . . Everything is finished. I have sufficiently 'enjoyed' Europe. It has repelled me like dust. Next week, I shall already be in Algeria, without the least earthly hope, and even without money. What does it matter? . . . Good-bye to the here-below, and on to the Garden of Allah!" The next day he wrote to Oesch in the same state of mind and concluded, "I should like to reach Biskra (an oasis in the desert), not in order to die, but to be decanted according to the will of the All-One. I no longer need anything. Perhaps I will evaporate like a song never heard. The West has run over me like a wheel, and broken my ribs. Now there can be no more concessions, there is only the Supreme Solitary, the Lord of the living and the dead."

However, one of the next days Schuon had a visit—probably from a friend—and after some “terrible hours” of discussion, he let himself be persuaded to return to Basel for a period of reflection. However, he first went to the Abbey of Notre-Dame de Scourmont, where his brother lived, thinking to see him for the last time, so great was his conviction that he was leaving Europe forever. From Belgium he sent a letter (April 25, 1932) to one of his Swiss friends: “[My brother] agrees with me completely concerning my view of my future and would do the same if he were in the world. . . . Yesterday we discussed the expressions of the Intellect and the diversity of truths with some intensity, but with no result.” Then he added, “When shall I be able to realize that Unity which is perfectly consonant with my being?” One month later, in a very significant letter to Oesch, he vehemently wrote:

Have I ever said that the path to God passes through Mecca? If there were any essential difference between a path that passes through Benares and one that passes through Mecca, how could you think that I would wish to come to God “through Mecca,” and thereby betray Christ and the Vedanta? In what way does the highest spiritual path pass through Mecca or Benares or Lhasa or Jerusalem or Rome? Is the Nirvana of Mecca different from the Nirvana of Benares simply because it is called *fanâ* and not *nirvâna*? Do I have to explain to you once again that either we are esoterists and metaphysicians who transcend forms—just as Christ walked over the waters—and who make no distinction between Allah and Brahma, or else we are exoterists, “theologians”—or at best mystics—who consequently live in forms like fish in water, and who make a distinction between Mecca and Benares? (letter to Albert Oesch, May 15, 1932)

A few weeks later Schuon did indeed go to Basel, and then Lausanne, where he continued to perfect his Arabic and where he met a Persian<sup>12</sup> who taught him the *Fâtihah* (the *surah* that opens the Quran). Finally he went to Mulhouse, where he was offered a well-paid job; but there was nothing to be done, his decision had been made.

In November, after putting the finishing touches to the manuscript of his book *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung*, which he saw as a sort of testament, he left for Marseilles, where he stayed for some time in the district of the Vieux Port (the Old Harbor). Lucy von Dechend joined him there and brought him the money she had obtained by selling some of her personal possessions to help him embark on his journey. Walking around the harbor, Schuon and Lucy von Dechend made the acquaintance of a seaman of Arab origin, Hâjj Shuti Mohammed, who invited them to visit a ship about to leave for China, and to see the little *zâwiyah*—or prayer room—that the sailors had set up in the hold.

They explained that they were members of a brotherhood based in Mostaghanem. On leaving the ship, Schuon and his friend went to a coffeehouse near the port. A man of Indian appearance came in. At the request of Schuon, who still dreamed of going to India, he sat down at their table. At that moment a child came up to Schuon and insisted that he write something. To satisfy the child, Schuon wrote the *Shahâdah* in Arabic on a piece of paper that he then held out to him—something that did not fail to surprise their new friend,<sup>13</sup> who, having thus gained confidence in them, explained that he was an Indian Muslim, and that he had just returned from Mostaghanem where his master, the venerable Shaykh Al-‘Alawî, lived. The very next day, Hâjj Shutî—of whom Schuon said later that he was like a “guardian angel” for him—took them to a little *zâwiyah* near the Vieux Port where Yemeni dervishes gathered. They too were disciples of the aged Sufi master and they too encouraged Schuon to go to Mostaghanem.<sup>14</sup> Schuon had most likely never heard of this Shaykh in spite of the growing influence of his *tarîqah*, which was often criticized or even opposed.

Soon after the departure of Lucy von Dechend, who returned to Basle, Schuon embarked for Oran, but not before visiting Notre-Dame de la Garde one last time. In his mind this escape to Algeria was irreversible and marked his definitive rupture with a West which he, like Guénon, abhorred.

When he disembarked in Oran, Schuon was immediately sensitive to the change of atmosphere. As he did not yet possess any traditional garments, he went to a shop in the Arab quarter:

At the back of the shop sat the proprietor: an Arab with an aristocratic air, whose face is unforgettable; it was like the image of resignation to God. . . . He was like the incarnation of Islam, and his face alone would have sufficed to convert someone. He did not speak to me, but only looked at me with his deep gaze, while his son—a young, distinguished looking man—served me, offering me a cup of mint tea and asking me a few kindly questions as to the purpose of my journey. (letter to Titus Burckhardt, January 5, 1983)

In spite of the state of health of the aged Shaykh, who had just returned from Mecca, Schuon was received by him the day after his arrival in Mostaghanem:

One could compare the meeting with such a spiritual messenger with what, for example, it would have been like, in the middle of the twentieth century, to meet a medieval saint or a Semitic patriarch; such was the impression given by him who, in our own time, was one of the great masters of Sufism: Shaykh Al-Hâjj Ahmad Abu ‘l-‘Abbâs ibn Mustafa ‘l-‘Aliwa. . . . Dressed in a brown *jellabah* and white turban—



with his silver beard, visionary eyes and long hands, the gestures of which seemed laden with the flow of his *barakah*—he exhaled something of the pure and archaic ambience of the time of Sayyidnâ Ibrâhîm al-Khalîl (Abraham). He spoke in an enfeebled, gentle voice, a voice of cracked crystal, letting his words fall drop by drop. His eyes, two sepulchral lamps, appeared to settle on nothing, but, through whatever objects might lie in their path, to see only one sole reality, that of the Infinite—or perhaps, only one sole void, within the husk of things: a very straight gaze, almost hard in its enigmatic immobility, yet full of goodness. Often the long slits of his eyes would widen suddenly, as if captivated by a marvelous sight. The cadence of ritual songs, dances, and incantations seemed to be perpetuated in him in unending vibrations; his head sometimes moved in a rhythmic rocking, while his soul was plunged in the inexhaustible mysteries of the Divine Name, hidden in the *dhikr*, the remembrance of God. . . . An impression of unreality emanated from his person, he was so distant, closed, and unfathomable in his abstract simplicity. . . . He was surrounded by the veneration due to a saint, to a leader, to an old man, and to one who is dying.<sup>15</sup>

A short time after his arrival, at the end of November 1932, Schuon received a letter from René Guénon which Lucy von Dechend had forwarded: “I am shocked,” Guénon wrote, “to see the date on your letter and wonder whether this will reach you and where; all sorts of regrettable circumstances are to blame, related to the relentless war being waged against me, of which *Le Voile d’Isis* may have given you some echoes. . . . Having said this to explain my unintentional delay, I wonder if you have already realized your plan of leaving for Algeria, or if you are going to do so. . . . I would advise you to go to Mostaghanem and see Shaykh Ahmad ibn ‘Aliwa, to whom you can introduce yourself from me.”

At the beginning of January 1933 Schuon, who had in the meantime replied to Guénon, received another letter (whose envelope he kept) addressed directly to Mostaghanem: “You were perhaps surprised to see that I advised you to go to precisely the place where you are now, and yet this ‘coincidence’ has nothing strange about it.” Then, after giving some details about the Darqawî and Shadhîlî Orders, and expressing his concern for the state of the Shaykh’s health, Guénon adds, “[I]n any case, the first essential is affiliation with the Order: the rest can come afterwards, often in an unexpected way. . . .”

Schuon<sup>16</sup> stayed nearly four months in the Shaykh Al-‘Alawî’s proximity and became affiliated at the end of January 1933 by the old Shaykh himself in the presence of Adda Ben Tounes, who was then *muqaddam*.

Some people—some in the ‘Alawîya *Tariqah* itself—now question the reality of this affiliation. Without even referring to all the indirect testimonies which

confirm the simple historical reality of this initiation, we can give here the formal proof of Schuon's initiation by Shaykh Al-'Alawî. This proof is provided by a letter written to Titus Burckhardt on February 15, 1955,<sup>17</sup> by a then influential member of the 'Alawîya *Tarîqah* at that time, namely 'Abdallâh Reda (the sculptor Alphonse Izard), who had long been in charge of the journal *Les Amis de l'Islam* ("The Friends of Islam," the official publication of the *Tarîqah*) and who was the author of a collection of the sayings of Shaykh Adda entitled *Jesus, Soul of God* (Oran: Plaza, 1958). The letter contains the following passage:

Since the name of Sidi 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn (Frithjof Schuon) has been mentioned, permit me to tell you the story of his becoming affiliated to Shaykh Al-'Alawî, the *murshid* of his time and the one who foretold the *maqâm* of the venerable Shaykh Sidi Hâjj Al-Mahdî (may God be satisfied with both of them). My story has witnesses, living witnesses known to 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn; they are the great ones of our beautiful and pure *Tarîqah* of Allâh. Sidi 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn placed his hand in the hand of the venerable Sidi Ahmad Al-'Alawî. . . .

This more than explicit manuscript letter was written on paper bearing the letterhead of *Les Amis de l'Islam* in connection with an exchange of controversial letters with Artébas Saïd following the visit to Schuon and Burckhardt in 1955 by a group of 'Alawî *fuqarâ* accompanying the second successor to Shaykh Al-'Alawî, the young Shaykh Al-Mahdî. We shall speak of this visit later. Bearing in mind the nature of his position and the tone of the rest of his letter, which is about something entirely different, the writer has no reason to falsify the truth. He limits himself to a spontaneous testimony. Besides, other letters exchanged at this time corroborate and authenticate the version of the facts scrupulously reported by 'Abdallâh Reda.

One can only deplore the fact that, some sixty-six years later, the memory of this initiation should apparently be so poorly preserved by the present representative of the 'Alawîya *Tarîqah*, according to whom it was not Shaykh Al-'Alawî, but his successor, Shaykh Adda Ben Tounes, who initiated Schuon in 1935. This is not without importance, as the future was to show.

The French authorities in Algeria did not look kindly on the presence of a European among the Arabs. They therefore decided to summon Schuon and Shaykh Al-'Alawî himself. Because of his state of health, the old Shaykh was represented at this convocation by a *muqaddam*. Following these interrogations,<sup>18</sup> and in order not to needlessly complicate the situation of the *Tarîqah*, Schuon decided to cut short his stay and, having given up the idea of going to Morocco as he had originally intended, he returned to France.

Schuon had sent an article from Mostaghanem<sup>19</sup> to *Le Voile d'Isis*—the journal in which Guénon wrote—dedicated to Shaykh Al-'Alawî and entitled "The

Ternary Aspect of the Monotheistic Tradition.” It was his first contribution. In it he evoked, for the first time, the notion of the “essential and transcendent unity” of the three monotheistic religions. This text appeared in June 1933, immediately following an article by Guénon entitled “Spiritual Knowledge and ‘Profane Culture.’” Thereafter Schuon contributed regularly to this journal, which Guénon was soon to rename *Études Traditionnelles*. For a few years, Schuon’s contributions had strongly Islamic connotations.<sup>20</sup> It was in the “entirely primordial simplicity”<sup>21</sup> of Islam that he was now commencing that “inner rebirth” to which he had so ardently aspired.

Guénon was very satisfied by Schuon’s initiation: “The essential thing is that you have been able to receive the *tarîqah* [this word written in Arabic], for this constitutes a link which cannot but be very useful to you in the future, from many points of view.”

Shortly after his return to Europe, Schuon once again met his old school friend Titus Burckhardt and had a long conversation with him about Islam, the Maghrib, and Guénon. Burckhardt said later that this meeting had been “decisive” for him. An exemplary friendship was formed between them. On the advice of his friend, Burckhardt soon went to Fez, where he stayed for a whole winter and learned Arabic, which he later mastered perfectly and which enabled him to undertake his well-known translations. After several fruitless attempts to contact Sufi circles, he was initiated into the Darqâwîya *Tarîqah*, a Shadhilite branch close to that of Shaykh Al-‘Alawî. From then on he immersed himself in Sufi wisdom, traditional art, and science, in which he became a renowned expert.

In Paris, Schuon met Louis Massignon, Émile Dermenghem, and Mohammed Al-Fâsi, and continued his regular correspondence with Guénon, whose counsels he gladly sought. He also met Léopold Ziegler in Überlingen. Meanwhile, a little more than a year after his return from Mostaghanem—on July 11, 1934, to be exact—Schuon recounts that he had an exceptional spiritual experience which was to change the course of his life. He wrote later that while sitting in his little room in the Hôtel de Lodi in the Rue Dauphine in Paris, absorbed in reading the Bhagavad Gîtâ, he felt that the Divine Name was being actualized in him with an overwhelming resonance and intensity. He later said that the Name had “swooped down on him like an eagle on its prey.”<sup>22</sup>

For three days this “Presence” vibrated within him. Walking along the bank of the Seine, he had the feeling that everything was “transparent, fluid, infinite. . . .” A few days later he learned from some Algerian friends that Shaykh Al-‘Alawî had died on that same date, July 11, 1934.<sup>23</sup>

## THE SHAYKH

Schuon’s first book, on which, as we know, he had been working for several years, was published in 1935. Written in German, and with a preface by Siegfried Lang

(who had already published several favorable commentaries on Guénon's books), it was published by the Orell Füssli Verlag in Zürich.<sup>24</sup> Its title, *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung*, may be translated as Guiding Thoughts for Meditation on the Real or, as Jacques-Albert Cuttat suggested in his book review in *Le Voile d'Isis* of November 1935, Supports for Meditation. This childhood friend, who was to become one of Schuon's early disciples before leaving him many years later, wrote at that time:

In this collection of metaphysical fragments the most diverse aspects of human life are reduced, in pithy turns of phrase, to their principal meaning. . . . We scarcely know of any pages in which these two indivisible aspects of the Principle—its absolute transcendence and its immediate actuality—are evoked with such power. . . . Under Schuon's pen, the fundamental words of Eckhart spontaneously regain their metaphysical meaning, a meaning which they doubtless had when they were written, at a time closer to spiritual realities than is ours.<sup>25</sup>

In March 1935, Schuon returned to Mostaghanem, where the Khalîfa Sidi Adda Ben Tounes, nephew by marriage of the late *murshid*, had succeeded Shaykh Al-'Alawî. Contrary to what has sometimes been alleged, Schuon did not solicit the function of *muqaddam* which Shaykh Adda conferred upon him at that time. It appears rather that, in order to conform to Shaykh Al-'Alawî's wishes,<sup>26</sup> Shaykh Adda took this decision after Schuon had gone through a long and edifying *khalwah* (retreat). In accordance with custom,<sup>27</sup> Shaykh Adda presented the new *muqaddam* with a diploma (*ijâzah*) signed by himself. This says in particular:

I attest . . . that we have had the visit of that person of pure soul, excellent virtues, and "sincere penitence," our brother in Allâh Sidi 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn, European by birth and residence, and that he has recently had prolonged contact with us, which has allowed us to scrutinize his spiritual states, his words and his actions, and we have—and the truth must be told—seen only what reassures the believer and pleases the initiate of Allâh, the Loving-Kind and the Knowing, "who chooses for Himself whom He pleases, and guides to Himself him who turns to Him in penitence." Considering the foregoing in the light of our knowledge of this brother in Allâh, I have authorized him to spread the call to Islam among his own people, the Europeans, transmitting the word of the *Tawhîd* . . . .<sup>28</sup>

The principal function of a *muqaddam* is of course to transmit an initiation, a spiritual influence, and in this very way to link those initiated to the *silsilah*, the uninterrupted line of descent from the Prophet, and thereby give them access to the invocation of the Divine Name, the "Way of the Heart."

After his stay in Mostaghanem, Schuon went for a time to Fez, where Titus Burckhardt was then living, and later returned to France. Soon afterwards, Guénon wrote him a warm letter: "My congratulations on your new dignity of *muqaddam*."

In fact, Guénon—for whom initiation was the key to everything, as he explained on many occasions—saw in this an opening for all those who approached him and sought to be initiated into a traditional esoteric line. From then on he suggested to several of his correspondents that they make contact with Schuon. However, the latter, who was only twenty-eight years old, had much difficulty with the showy pretensions of some of these aspirants, filled to the brim as they were with Guénonian talk about the intellectual élite. "It is extremely difficult," he later wrote to Jean-Pierre Laurant, "for a young man to judge, or give the impression of judging, men of mature years, or even very old men, who seek admission, and who obviously believe that they are 'qualified'; the few refusals meant interminable difficulties for the *muqaddam*. . . ." <sup>29</sup>

Three groups were formed: one in Basel where Schuon had several friends who followed him, another in Lausanne, and a third in Amiens under the direct authority of Schuon himself, who had just found work there as a designer. From that time on the *muqaddam* traveled from one town to another to give advice and instruction. He wrote many letters about questions of form and doctrine for the edification of novices. Titus Burckhardt, who had returned to Basel, gave him the support of the considerable expertise he had acquired in these matters.

In France it was the time of the Popular Front; the social and economic difficulties of the moment were not without repercussions for Schuon, whose salary was not always paid regularly. To buy his train tickets he had to seek the help of his friends. "I will give you back the 15 francs when I receive my pay. . . . If I had not had S.K.'s help I would have had to sleep under the Pont Neuf. . . . The Lausannois think that the Baslers and the French are supporting me, the Baslers think that the Lausannois and the French are supporting me, and the French think it is the Swiss who are supporting me," he wrote to Titus Burckhardt in an undated letter.

Some time later, however, he found a better paid job in Thann in Alsace, which brought him closer to Switzerland and enabled him to live in the family home in Mulhouse where his mother and his half-aunt Hélène still lived. The situation was not easy, and relations between them often proved difficult. Schuon thought several times of abandoning everything. A plan to emigrate to Tahiti—quite unrealistic but no doubt connected with the development of the international situation at the time—was made by two of his friends. Guénon was alarmed, but the project was abandoned after they had been on the island for only two months. About the same time, Schuon gave a few lectures in Basel on the universality of religions. He said of these very rare public appearances that they had attracted only one worthwhile listener who in himself was a sufficient

justification for their having taken place.<sup>30</sup> This person was Leo Schaya, then nineteen years old, who asked Schuon to guide him in his personal spiritual quest. Leo Schaya was to become one of his confidants and intimate friends and later a valued spiritual counselor for many.

At almost the same time Michel Vâlsan, a Romanian who already knew Guénon's works well and had unbounded admiration for him, was spending a period in Paris. Brilliant, and with a very strong personality, he had suffered harmful psychic influences which had profoundly disturbed him. Informed of the existence of Schuon's group, he made contact with Schuon. He then went back to his own country for two years, profitably using the time by learning Arabic and studying Islam; then he returned to Paris for good, taking up a post at the consulate of Romania. He became a distinguished Arabic scholar and the veritable pioneer of Ibn 'Arabî studies in France.

At the end of 1936 however, a new event of a spiritual order was to change the situation. Schuon was living through a period of doubt and discouragement, a sort of dark night, when one morning he woke up with the dazzling and intrinsic certitude that he had been invested with the function of *Shaykh*. That same night several of his friends had visionary dreams concerning him, all of which confirmed his acquisition of this new function from on high.<sup>31</sup> One thing is certain: Schuon received this unexpected grace more as a burden than as a consecration. He said later that this function had come too soon but that "he did not have the choice."

It was at about the same time that there began for him an unhappy love that caused him to suffer for more than ten years. He fell deeply in love with the sister of one of his childhood friends, but the inconstancy of this young woman, who was remarkably beautiful and very feminine, and who would be close and distant by turns, wounded him painfully. This trial lasted until the marriage of this woman with somebody else. Schuon was later to write that through this double life—at once a spiritual master and a true *fedele d'amore*<sup>32</sup>—Providence had in a fashion forestalled the pride that lies in wait for the metaphysician or esoterist and compelled him to retain a sense of everyday realities.

Guénon encouraged the young *Shaykh* to assume the full consequences of his function, which fact distanced the latter from Mostaghanem. The two men wrote to each other very often at this time. Schuon deferentially asked questions of a doctrinal order, expounded his own point of view, and replied to questions from Guénon, who asked for news about this person or that, and repeatedly referred to the attacks to which he considered himself relentlessly subjected, or to his constant fear that his letters were not arriving.

Questions were of course asked as to the traditional regularity of Schuon's assumption of independence with respect to the 'Alawîya *Tarîqah* (from that time on he had become *Shaykh 'Îsâ*). Traditionally, it is considered that the function of a *Shaykh*, like that of a king, comes not from man but from God. On the other

hand, it is said that the function of a *khalifah* (lieutenant, representative) who, like an elected president is merely *primus inter pares*, comes from man. This is the reason why a *muqaddam*, a *khalifah*, or a *nâ'ib* (designated successor) can be removed from office by the Shaykh who has appointed him, whereas a Shaykh himself cannot be deposed. The direct affiliation of Schuon with Shaykh Al-'Alawî—and not with his successor—thus gave him a *de facto* independence. "It is certain that you can perfectly well consider yourself as being spiritually answerable to none other than [Shaykh Ahmad] alone," Guénon wrote to him at the time (letter of April 24, 1935). Besides, Shaykh Adda never called Schuon's independence into question. Guénon several times confirmed the regularity of this assumption of independence as well as the perfect continuity of the *silsilah*. It can even be said that he was pleased about this independence, and he clearly explained, "What is unfortunate is that these are things which can scarcely be understood in Mostaghanem, because they are completely unknown there; I fully agree with you about this."

The independence that a *muqaddam* of Schuon—in fact Michel Vâlsan—later claimed in his turn gave Guénon the opportunity to reaffirm this "regularity," and this cuts short to some current speculations about Schuon's initiatory status: "The necessary and sufficient condition is to be the representative of an authentic *silsilah*; this is what the whole question of 'regularity' really comes down to" (letter from René Guénon to Frithjof Schuon, October 5, 1950).<sup>33</sup>

## WAR YEARS

Frithjof Schuon met René Guénon for the first time when he visited Cairo in 1938. He was thirty-one and Guénon, fifty-two. At their first meeting Guénon awaited him, dressed in Egyptian style, "tall, thin, and distinguished like a Byzantine mosaic." His welcome was kindly and warm, but if Schuon was a little disappointed by the psychic lassitude that he thought he perceived in Guénon (he spoke later of a "sort of mental exhaustion"), by the banality of his subjects of conversation (which others had also noted), and indeed, by his almost permanent restlessness, he nevertheless affirmed that "the man was sufficiently fine and mysterious to make up for what might trouble or disappoint me in one way or another."<sup>34</sup> It is no doubt this impression that led him to note in his posthumous tribute to Guénon, "The man seemed to be unaware of his genius, just as his genius, inversely, seemed to be unaware of the man."<sup>35</sup>

Schuon stayed in Cairo for a week, visiting Guénon nearly every day. Staying in the neighborhood of the Sayyidnâ Hussein mosque, near Al-Azhar and not far from the bazaar, he made the acquaintance of two venerable Shaykhs. One of them, Shaykh Abd ar-Rahîm, told him that "*Tasawwuf* is a taste

(*dhawq*)," a typically Ibn 'Arabî formulation<sup>36</sup> which Schuon liked to recall, and the other, Shaykh Haggâg, gave him the blessing of the Qâdiriya *Tariqah*. Guénon was very happy with his conversations with Schuon, and after Schuon's departure he wrote him a letter dated July 17, which for the first time began "Dear Sidi 'Îsâ."<sup>37</sup> In it he said, "We only regret that your stay could not have been a little longer, but we, too, hope that this visit will not be the last!"

At the beginning of the following year Schuon gave up his professional activity, which was taking up too much of his time, and started to think seriously of returning to live in Switzerland. However, in August 1939, he undertook a journey to India in the company of two English disciples. One of them, John Levy, was very wealthy and took on the expenses of the journey. On the way they stopped in Cairo and Schuon was thus able to see Guénon for a longer period, as the latter had wished. Guénon was ill at the time, and lay on a mat on the floor. He had temporarily let his beard grow. Schuon wrote that "he radiated a sort of benevolence," and that in his presence one felt a "spiritual greatness."<sup>38</sup> During his stay, John Levy gave Guénon a large sum of money so that he could buy a bigger house, for he was then only a tenant, and Adrian Paterson, a young Englishman who had become a close friend of Guénon's,<sup>39</sup> made up the difference.

After a stop at Aden, the travelers arrived in Bombay on September 2, where they learned that the Second World War had just broken out. As a French citizen, Schuon had to join his regiment without delay. As for the two Britons, they were able to stay in India.<sup>40</sup>

Thus Schuon spent only three days in the colorful heat and humidity of fascinating prewar Bombay. Between visits to two temples, he took the time to buy a copy of the Bhagavad Gîtâ in Sanskrit, which he carried with him as a protection and a blessing in wartime Europe. He said later, "I had to return to Europe right away, so as not to be, as it were, submerged by India, which would have put an end to my work" (letter to Leo Schaya, December 27, 1982). The boat on the return voyage took a good month to reach Marseilles, making wide zigzags in the Indian Ocean in order to avoid unwelcome confrontations.

As soon as he arrived home, Schuon, like his brother, was mobilized. A letter of December 8, 1939, to Titus Burckhardt—to whom he had sent photographs of his travels—tells us that Schuon was a soldier in Formation 722, 6 D.A.T., postal sector 390, with no other details. On February 17, 1940, as the "phoney war" continued, another letter to Burckhardt tells us that he was near the Rhine on the Maginot line, not far from the Swiss border, in the first company of gunners: "Perhaps you have received some of my articles, all of which are with Vâlsan; he is responsible for copying and distributing them." Schuon is concerned about the fate of his *fuqarâ*, and generous in giving them advice. One is astonished to find a long postscript of three pages, written at night, in which he develops a commentary on several Quranic chapters and on metaphysics:



Intelligence is metaphysical by definition—there is no other intelligence. The intelligence that enables a philosopher to spew out his petty salon ineptitudes [see Bergson, “The-Man-Who-Is-Not-Sure-of-Surviving” and also his article, “The Religion of a Philosopher”] is sufficient to comprehend the fundamental truths of metaphysics, at least in sufficient measure to prevent the philosopher from doing harm and wasting his time. If he were sent to Siberia, he would certainly be cured of “pure duration” and become a metaphysician, or at least he would become capable of becoming one.<sup>41</sup>

In June 1940, the lightning advance of the German troops quickly routed the French regiments. Schuon’s regiment beat a retreat toward Béthencourt and Clerval, where the soldiers were surrounded and consequently had to surrender. Schuon spent a month in a prisoner-of-war camp in Besançon. The Alsatians, considered to be Germans, were set apart and sent to Colmar, where they were freed. Foreseeing that he would soon be forcibly drafted into the German army, Schuon immediately decided to risk trying to reach Switzerland. Leaving Hirsingue by night, he went on foot through the forests and ravines of the Jura in the direction of Delémont. He was stopped by Swiss soldiers the next morning after having crossed barbed wire, evaded a guarded clearing, and providentially found a way through without detection. Following two weeks of detention at Breitenbach, he lodged for a time in Lausanne, and, after months of bureaucratic delay, he received a residence permit in the summer of 1941.

In June of the same year, thanks to the generosity of a disciple, he moved to an apartment in the Chemin de Lucinge, where he remained for nearly ten years. It was the first residence in which he could truly make himself at home and create a traditional ambience which suited and corresponded to him. For Schuon this return to Switzerland, where he remained for exactly forty years, unquestionably marked the end of a cycle in his life that had begun some twenty years earlier, and the beginning of a new period of great spiritual and intellectual fecundity.

The articles which were published in *Études Traditionnelles* during that time show a certain change of orientation. They are more metaphysical and the subjects they deal with are much wider in scope and less Islamic. The very beautiful “Communion and Invocation,” which appeared in May 1940, is a landmark in this regard, as in it Schuon broached, for the first time in a significant way, the question of Christianity. In the same issue he comments briefly on the image of the Black Virgin of Czenstochowa.

Inevitably, the war had caused the dispersion of the various friends. Mail had no longer circulated freely. From Paris Michel Vâlsan,<sup>42</sup> whom Schuon had named *muqaddam*, was nonetheless able, by means of the Romanian diplomatic bag, to exchange a few more letters with Guénon who still resided in Cairo. It

was also, by force of circumstances, the occasion for Vâlsan to take on a certain autonomy.

### QUAESTIONES DISPUTATAE

Schuon recounts that, as he prayed in his *khalwah*<sup>43</sup> on December 27, 1942, he had a spiritual experience which he accepted as a “gift”: it was a kind of liberating illumination or, in Islamic terms, a *naḡath ar-Rûh*, an inspiration of the Spirit, which was manifested by a dazzling actualization—a sudden intellective opening—of what was to become the fundamental framework of his spiritual method, which he continued to develop in his private teachings until the time of his death.

This is not the place to explain in detail the nature of this invocatory alchemy, especially as Schuon deliberately said little about it in his published writings. The most explicit reference he made to it is in the last chapter of *Stations of Wisdom*<sup>44</sup> (1958; English translation 1961). For Schuon, esoteric doctrine must result in an appropriate method of spiritual realization. As he liked to recall, following Shaykh Al-‘Alawî,<sup>45</sup> religious rites find their justification in the remembrance of God which they induce. “The remembrance of God is what is greatest” says the Quran, since (and here we use the expression of Ramakrishna) “God and His Name are one.”

Having thus put the emphasis on the invocation of a Divine Name,<sup>46</sup> the “prayer of the Heart” or way of inwardness henceforth appeared more than ever as the spiritual method most suited for our time. Very schematically, the Schuonian themes are expressed by the spiritual intentions<sup>47</sup> that arise from the three fundamental planes of human nature—Will, Love, and Knowledge—each seen in its complementary polarity—Renunciation and Act, Peace and Fervor, Discernment and Union. The purpose of these six themes of meditation is to introduce or accompany the invocation of the revealed Name so as to favor the putting into operation of essential spiritual and moral virtues, which are none other than the expression of divine qualities. Most importantly, invocation has as its corollary *faqr* (poverty of spirit), since, according to a key formulation in Schuon’s teaching, “There is no *dhikr* without *faqr*,” or no actualization of the divine Presence without a prior “emptiness” or “poverty” on the part of the human receptacle: “The remembrance of God is our true homeland, the homeland that will make us happy. . . . ‘Be silent and know that I am God.’ (Psalm) Therein lies everything” (letter to Leo Schaya, March 23, 1983).

The increased importance that Schuon gave to the invocation of the Divine Name and to the practice of virtue was for him linked with a revival of his sensibility to the spiritual influence of Hinduism and thus with an accentuation of the esoteric aspect of his perspective. To this influence would soon be added that of the primordial world of the Plains Indians.

This accentuation was not to everyone's taste. Michel Vâlsan, a man of great piety who had found in Islam as expressed by Ibn 'Arabî the spiritual modalities that best suited his voluntaristic nature—and, as he later wrote, in the writings of René Guénon an “infallible compass”—reacted negatively and, from 1946 onwards, assailed Guénon with letters criticizing Schuon, whose perspective he did not understand.

Guénon listened to his criticisms, but nevertheless sought peace. Several letters of 1946 refer to misunderstandings which both of them strove to dispel: “We were very happy to learn that many things had been clarified following Sidi Mustafa's [M. Vâlsan's] visit, something that we never doubted. . . . As regards the distortions, I need hardly tell you that I am far from giving credence to all the remarks that people attribute to you” (letter from René Guénon, May 22, 1946).

On November 9, 1946, Guénon wrote further:

I am glad to know that you received a copy of the clarification sent to Paris. I think it was necessary in order to dissipate completely any misunderstandings that might still persist, though fortunately the situation has now greatly improved. It is also quite certain, as you have said, that the isolation among us during the war has been a factor in many of these difficulties.

Their relations continued to be very courteous and their exchanges numerous and fruitful. Guénon enquired about the title of Schuon's next book (his first in French), which was to appear in the collection *Tradition*, edited by Luc Benoist for the Gallimard publishing house: “As regards the change in the title of your book, it is indeed probable that this will make it more understandable to many people; I well know that the word “tradition” is much abused at the present moment. . . .” (letter of November 9, 1946). The projected title had been *De l'Unité ésotérique des formes traditionnelles* (The Esoteric Unity of Traditional Forms), but this was changed to *De l'Unité transcendante des Religions* (The Transcendent Unity of Religions), an expression that was to become well known.

From 1947 onwards, a subject that often cropped up in the frequent correspondence between Schuon and Guénon was that of the spirituality of the North American Indians. Joseph Epes Brown, a young American ethnologist close to Schuon, had, at the latter's request, undertaken to record the valuable testimony of Black Elk,<sup>48</sup> an elderly Sioux medicine man and the repository of an authentic traditional wisdom. Schuon, who since childhood had been fascinated by the “combative heroism” and “priestly appearance”<sup>49</sup> of the Great Plains Indians, corresponded with Black Elk through Joseph Epes Brown and Benjamin Black Elk, with whom he would correspond before meeting him in America at a later date. He encouraged Brown to publish the material he was collecting, and in due

course this appeared under the title of *The Sacred Pipe*. Shortly afterwards Schuon wrote an introduction to the French translation of this book. Guénon suggested that it be included in the Gallimard collection *Tradition*, but it was finally published by Payot (Lausanne) in 1953, under the title *Les rites secrets des Indiens Sioux*. "I see," wrote Guénon, "that as far as the American Indian tradition is concerned, things are developing in a most important and, from all points of view, extremely satisfying way. I confess that for me at least, this was entirely unexpected, as I had never had occasion to look into what might still remain of this tradition. There is no doubt that all of this has, as you say, profound reasons" (letter of December 16, 1947). This interest in the American Indians was maintained and there are many references to it in Guénon's letters during 1949. Schuon published his "Remarks on the Tradition of the Indians of North America" (this was his introduction to Brown's book), and Guénon published "Silence and Solitude" in *Études Traditionnelles* in March 1949.

The publication in January 1948 of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* was the true beginning of Schuon's written work. Though still strongly influenced by the Guénonian perspective and style, this work already undeniably bears the mark of Schuon's own genius. In the preface, he writes, "If the expression 'transcendent unity' is used, it means that the unity of the religious forms must be realized in a purely inward and spiritual way and without prejudice to any particular form. The antagonisms between these forms no more affect the one universal truth than the antagonisms between opposing colors affect the transmission of the uncolored truth."<sup>50</sup> In the same preface Schuon salutes René Guénon, "who, in a series of remarkable works, has made himself the interpreter of the still living intellectuality of the East, and more particularly of India: it is of the greatest interest to become familiar with these works, the reading of which would moreover facilitate the understanding of our own book. . . ." When the book appeared in English translation in 1953, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, T. S. Eliot, declared, "I have met with no more impressive work in the comparative study of Oriental and Occidental religions."<sup>51</sup>

However, the publication, in *Études Traditionnelles* of July-August 1948, of an article by Schuon entitled "Mystères Christiques" (The Christly Mysteries) was to complicate considerably his relations with Guénon. By emphasizing the wholly esoteric nature of the Christian sacraments, Schuon was in fact implicitly expressing a view contrary to the Guénonian thesis, namely, that Christianity—viewed by Guénon as corresponding in its early beginnings to an exo-esoteric schema analogous to that of Islam<sup>52</sup>—had lost, as the result of a "descent" to the exoteric level, its original esoteric character in the third or fourth century.

In fact Schuon, who had acquired considerable experience as well as an undeniable spiritual and intellectual maturity, no longer considered that he had either to take or leave all the Guénonian theses en bloc. To his already different attitude towards Buddhism—which Guénon, following Shankara, had called a

heresy before finally changing his mind<sup>53</sup>—was now added his fundamentally distinct approach to Christianity, with which, even in Guénon's opinion, Schuon was more familiar than he.<sup>54</sup> Indeed until that time, Guénon had not had occasion to develop his point of view on the subject, and when Schuon published his "Mystères Christiques," he reacted above all because Schuon's presentation of Christianity differed from the general religious schema that he had himself expounded up till then.<sup>55</sup>

There was no outright rupture between them as has sometimes been alleged. They continued to correspond with courtesy until Guénon's death in January 1951. In all his letters, up to the last one in October 1950, Guénon used the introductory expression, "Most Excellent Shaykh and Beloved Brother." In a letter dated May 10, 1949, he expressed his pleasure at Schuon's imminent marriage to Sayyida Latîfah (Catherine Feer), whose photograph he had received, and added warmly, "We very much hope that we will soon see her here with you!" He also expressed his sadness on learning of the death of Schuon's mother a few weeks before his marriage.

On November 23, 1949, Guénon mentions the article on Christianity he is in the process of writing and says, "In the last part, as you will see, I have kept in mind certain questions raised in your letter. . . . Of course you are completely right to say that it is here much more a question of fact than doctrine, and your comparison with Buddhism is very apt; there is more than one point of similarity between the two cases, though that of Christianity is certainly even more obscure in many respects."

In July 1950 in replying to a letter from Schuon, Guénon mentions the article he is writing on the neo-Vedantists: "[I]t is certainly now more opportune than ever to clarify this question." He goes on, "But when can we finally see you again, and make the personal acquaintance of Sayyida Latîfah?" He then adds, "It is very fortunate that you have been able to acquire a new apartment. It must make a big difference to you, for it seems that the other space was very limited. . . . All our best wishes to you and Sayyida Latîfah and also to all our friends."

On August 19, 1950, he notes in passing, "Clavelle has written to tell me that your article on the 'Râmakrishna-Vivekananda Enigma' is going to appear in the July-August number [of *Études Traditionnelles*] and that he finds it quite remarkable. I will be glad to be able to read it soon."

His last letter (October 5, 1950) ends with "Best greetings and regards [amitiés]."

While it is true that on the question of Christianity opinions diverged, and that Guénon, easily offended and quick to criticize third parties in his letters, liked to complain to other correspondents that he was not being listened to,<sup>56</sup> and that he flatly refused to "reconsider his judgement," as his friend and quasi-secretary for more than ten years, Martin Lings requested him to do, it is no less

true that the “polemic [between Schuon and Guénon] was carried on by intermediaries who often did more than they were asked.”<sup>57</sup>

On this subject, let us say a word about the personality of Marcel Clavelle, alias Jean Reyor, editor-in-chief of *Études Traditionnelles* after Guénon’s departure for Egypt. Through his position Clavelle had become aware of all sorts of information and had met several of the protagonists of the period.<sup>58</sup> In many respects his role was not neutral and it is conceivable that, in particular, his manner of informing Guénon was not without consequences. In 1963 Clavelle wrote a long “confidential” text of fifty-three pages which is a personal version of the “direct and indirect information” which circumstances had led him to collect during his time as editor-in-chief of *Le Voile d’Isis* (later *Études Traditionnelles*) from 1928 to 1960. This unpublished document was extensively used by the authors of books about René Guénon,<sup>59</sup> who often reproduced it without much critical sense. In this plea *pro domo*, Clavelle sought in particular to give credence to the idea that Schuon and his close friends<sup>60</sup> had attempted to carry out a sort of *coup de force* against Guénon’s authority. Several of his assertions, and several of the “proclamations”<sup>61</sup> which he claimed to be reporting are out of keeping with the personalities of the parties concerned. We have been able to verify that several of his affirmations were *de facto* unfounded. On reading this document, one understands why Guénon wrote to Schuon in 1946, “I think by now it must be quite clear to you what the reasons are that should cause one to distrust everything that comes from Clavelle” (letter of May 22, 1946). It is less understandable, however, why Guénon sometimes thought it appropriate to confide in Clavelle regarding his anxieties and doubts.

In our opinion, Schuon never knew about Clavelle’s document.<sup>62</sup> But in 1976 he took the trouble to write to Jean-Pierre Laurant, the author of one of the best books on Guénon, a twenty-three page letter,<sup>63</sup> in order to refute some of the statements in the book, the source of which is obvious to anyone who has read Clavelle’s text.

Martin Lings had settled in Cairo some ten years earlier. A friend of Adrian Paterson, who had been a close associate of Guénon’s for several years, Lings has related how, following the accidental death of Paterson, he came to take his place as an intimate of Guénon and became his friend and confidant. An excellent Arab scholar and later the author of several authoritative works, Martin Lings visited Guénon almost daily, bringing him the copious mail which he would pick up for him at the post office. Guénon always opened his mail in front of him and commented on it. In this connection, this is no doubt the place to put to rest a calumny that one still sees in circulation here and there.

In the autumn of 1950, Guénon was already suffering from the illness that was to end his life. Irritable and often suspicious,<sup>64</sup> he went so far (in a letter of September 18, 1950 to Clavelle) as to suspect Lings—a man of integrity if ever there was one, but who had in Guénon’s eyes the fault of not sharing his views

on Christianity—on the sole basis of the state of a particular envelope and of an attitude that he judged to be equivocal, of having opened a letter to him from Titus Burckhardt without his knowledge, and to suppose that Lings might have done the same thing on previous occasions.

Some twenty years later, in 1970, an Italian journal published a facsimile of this defamatory letter which had been bought by the journal's editor, Roger Mari-dort, from the ever impecunious Clavelle. By publishing this letter, the editors of the journal obviously sought to denigrate Martin Lings and thereby Schuon, whose faithful friend Lings was.

The reality, however, was quite different, and Guénon's suspicions were unjustified. In this troubled period,<sup>65</sup> Egyptian censorship was zealous, and several times Martin Lings had already had to answer to them for letters addressed to Guénon, which the censors did not hesitate to open. Guénon knew this perfectly well, but his state of mind at that moment prevented him from recognizing the obvious. His suspicion was even less well founded in that he systematically gave all his letters to Lings to read, and especially, of course, those of Burckhardt, a friend of Lings,<sup>66</sup> whatever the tenor of these letters might be. In fact, only Guénon's already compromised state of health can explain this regrettable error of judgement.

One also owes it to the truth to say that the critical letters of Michel Vâlsan, who had sided with Guénon on the question of Christianity, did not help matters. Moreover, Schuon at that time wished that a separate branch of the *tarîqah* be formed around Michel Vâlsan (Sidi Mustafa), whose temperament was poorly suited to his perspective, and he gave his agreement in principle to Vâlsan's assumption of independence. On this occasion Guénon wrote to Schuon, "In general terms, your reply corresponds well to what I would have said if I had had time to write to you earlier, because you first asked my opinion about the matter; I think it is better, from all points of view, to come to an agreement amicably" (letter of October 5, 1950).

Guénon's health worsened considerably toward the end of November, and soon he could no longer get up. Exhausted, suffering greatly, unable to write, and no longer even interested in reading his mail,<sup>67</sup> Guénon died on January 7, 1951, at eleven o'clock in the evening.

Toward the end, he kept asking them [his wife and one of his relatives] for permission to die, as if he could choose the moment of his death, but they always asked him to stay a little longer, until at last he said to his wife, "May I not die now? I have suffered very much." She replied, "With Allâh's protection," and he died almost immediately, after one or two invocations. (letter from Martin Lings to Frithjof Schuon, January 11, 1951)

Affected by the death of one who for long years had been an undeniable point of reference for him, and with whom he had sincerely wished to be reconciled,<sup>68</sup> Schuon first sought a way of reconciliation with Vâlsan. However, their positions rapidly hardened and seemed to be intractable. Not without passion, Vâlsan wrote Schuon a long indictment in the form of an epistle and an admonition, the tone of which wounded him deeply. As a result of Vâlsan's independence, effective from then on, the Paris group of disciples split into two.

However, it was not until a few months later that Schuon discovered the full extent and harshness of the criticisms that had been made to Guénon about him for nearly four years. He had a true feeling of "betrayal." A trace of this can be found in the following passage from a letter to one of his friends:

Every happening is an opening towards the Truth. Allâh plays with the soul as with a veil that now hides, and now reveals Him. I was angry with those who felt they could scorn me; then, on reading the *surah Al-Hajj* [written in Arabic in the text], I came upon these verses (*ayât*): "If they argue with you, say, God knows perfectly what you do, God will judge between you on the Day of Resurrection, and He will settle your differences."<sup>69</sup> That gave me great peace, and I recited this passage many times. (letter of May 6, 1951)

It was in this context of conflict that he formulated his incisive "Criticisms" concerning certain aspects of Guénon's work—which some people thereafter systematically used against him.<sup>70</sup> The tone of these criticisms, "without any oratorical precautions or euphemisms," shocked more than one Guénonian when they were published, more or less unchanged, in 1984.<sup>71</sup>

Despite these controversies, it makes no sense to set Guénon and Schuon in opposition to one another today. The fact that they did not agree on everything must not make us forget that these two great *jñânins*, while having very different temperaments, were nonetheless in agreement on essentials, and that they remain, each in his own way,<sup>72</sup> the unsurpassable reanimators of the *sophia perennis*. "The divergences of the sages are a blessing," it is said in Islam.

What many of Schuon's detractors do not know is that several years later, in 1958, Michel Vâlsan went to Lausanne and, in a gesture of superb humility, apologized for everything that had happened, and suggested reintegrating his group within Schuon's. Though touched by the offer, Schuon declined,<sup>73</sup> for, as he wrote, he "did not want to reap what (Sidi Mustafa) had sown," and did not wish "to have under his authority men who were integrally Guénonian and somewhat hesitant with regard to [his] own perspective" (letter to Leo Schaya, September 3, 1958).



The reconciliation between Schuon and Vâlsan, even though obviously some divergences of viewpoint remained, made possible, among other things, a new lease on life and a real identity for *Études Traditionnelles*, of which Vâlsan became the editor-in-chief after three years. Many years later, following the underhand attacks by the Italian journal mentioned above, and into which Vâlsan had also been drawn, Schuon said, "I claim the highest degree of honor . . . for my former adversary Vâlsan, whose position I always respected—it was that of Guénon—and with whom, in spite of our divergences, I had good relations until his death."<sup>74</sup> There are indeed many, including Martin Lings, who can testify that right up to his death in November 1974 Vâlsan came to Lausanne several times and his relations with Schuon during these visits were always cordial.

### BIRTH OF AN ŒUVRE

The publication in 1953 of *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*<sup>75</sup> marked a turning point in Schuon's work. This book is incontestably the fruit of his new spiritual maturity and the crowning of the previous ten years. In our opinion, it signals the birth of his truly personal oeuvre. In the form of aphorisms taken from his letters, reading notes, and reflections written down day by day, this work, so rich in ideas and punctuated with dazzling bursts of imagery, deals with knowledge, virtue, esthetics, and Vedânta. It remains for many an inexhaustible bedside book. Having noted that his "work possesses the intrinsic authority of a contemplative intelligence," the English Thomist author Bernard Kelly adds, "In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Schuon speaks of grace as one in whom it is operative and, as it were, in virtue of that operation."<sup>76</sup>

In fact, in Frithjof Schuon there has never been the slightest trace of proselytism. He was content to expound his points of view as so many bottles cast into the sea and to deliver, to those who wanted to listen, what he considered to be his message. On browsing through his public and private writings, one often has the feeling that his inspiration comes to him in an uninterrupted flow which completely submerges his psyche—for he teaches, he does not comment, he offers so to speak direct words: "This is sometimes a burden to me; I would prefer to repose in the Sacred, but I always have to give and create," he confided one day to Leo Schaya (letter of May 12, 1967).

It was at this time that Schuon began to write for his disciples a long series of penetrating texts on all aspects of the spiritual method. Continuing right up to his death, he wrote more than a thousand of these, most of which of course remain unpublished.

Schuon's material situation improved progressively. Thanks to the generosity of a relative of his wife, the tiny apartments in which they had lived were fol-

lowed by a modest but comfortable house that was built for them in a quiet neighborhood on the slopes near Lausanne and Lake Geneva. His wife, who was seventeen years his junior, was the daughter of a German-Swiss diplomat. Having spent a part of her youth in Algiers, she spoke perfect French and could also express herself in Spanish, which she had learned during a stay in Argentina, and English. An artist by temperament and a gifted organizer, she helped to lay down a modicum of rules for the smooth functioning of the nascent community even though, intentionally, everything remained fairly informal.

Shortly after his marriage Schuon began to paint. The few sketches and simple canvases that he had produced up till then were followed by more formal paintings in which he rapidly affirmed his own style. In the course of the years, the evolution of their subjects was to express directly the spiritual inspiration of their author. For the first fifteen years his canvases were greatly influenced by the Native American world; later, from 1965 onwards, they were characterized by subjects of Marian inspiration. Then, in the 1980s, by way of synthesis, they were characterized by Pte San Win, the White Buffalo Maiden of Sioux mythology, and by the Eternal Feminine.<sup>77</sup>

My first paintings depicted two Red Indian women, one clothed and one naked; since then, I have returned more than once to this theme, which signifies the antithesis between sacred form and sacred content, or between the veiling and unveiling of the sacred. Besides purely narrative Indian paintings, I have frequently depicted the sage—or the masculine aspect of wisdom—in the form of an elderly Indian chief, often placing him in the center of a group. My paintings of women represent the complementary aspect of this, that is to say, beauty, with all the virtues that are attached to it; the point of departure here—as in all my other paintings—is not an intentional symbolism, but simply a reality flowing spontaneously from my nature; the meaning was prefigured in my inner being, and not in my conscious intention. . . . What I seek to express in my paintings—and I cannot really express anything else—is the Sacred in its association with Beauty, and thereby the spiritual attitudes and virtues of the soul. The vibrations emanating from paintings must be interiorizing.<sup>78</sup>

In March 1954 Schuon expressed his view of traditional art in an article, initially entitled “Principles and Criteria of Normative Art,” which appeared in *France-Asie* (Saigon) and which, slightly recast, became the chapter “Principles and Criteria of Universal Art” in *Castes and Races* (1957; English translation 1982). He had already broached this subject in a more allusive manner in the chapter “Esthetics and Symbolism in Art and Nature” in *Spiritual Perspectives* (1953; English translation 1954), and it is also dealt with throughout his

writings, especially in "Truths and Errors Concerning Beauty" in *Logic and Transcendence* (1970; English translation 1975), in "Foundations of an Integral Esthetics" and "The Degrees of Art" in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (1976; English translation 1981) and in "Art, Its Duties and Its Rights" in *The Transfiguration of Man* (1995; English translation 1995).

The year 1954 also marked the beginning of a long series of travels which, over the next twenty-six years, took Frithjof and Catherine Schuon to several Western European countries and also to Greece and Turkey, and Morocco on several occasions, and finally America.

In August, they went to Granada,<sup>79</sup> Seville, and Córdoba, and then on to Chaouen in Morocco, where Schuon prayed at the tomb of the Shaykh Al-Wâfi, a black Sufi of the seventeenth century who lived in the mountains as a hermit, and unceasingly invoked the Divine Name.

In October 1954, Schuon met Swami Ramdas in London. In his book *World is God*, which came out the following year, the venerable Swami describes his conversations under the title "Visit to a Sufi Saint." Ramdas was accompanied by Krishna Bai and several disciples. The meetings took place first at Marco Pallis's house and then at the house of Manibhai Patel, a Hindu scholar. As is often the case at the meeting of two exceptional spiritual personages, the atmosphere was warm—and not quite of this world; the air was as if impregnated with an intangible *barakah*. Ramdas later wrote that Schuon was "a very prince among saints." In quoting this expression, we are not seeking to force the point, but simply to underline the impression which contact with this "man of another time" could leave. His presence, his gaze, his severe and interiorized expression, his natural aristocracy never left anyone indifferent. "The sage is one who finds his plenitude in himself," noted Father Le Saux.<sup>80</sup> As if echoing this, Schuon says in *The Play of Masks*: "The pneumatic is the man who identifies himself *a priori* with his spiritual substance, and in consequence always remains faithful to himself; he is not a mask that does not know its bearer, as is the man enclosed in accidentality."<sup>81</sup>

Just as he was fond of places reminiscent of ancient wisdom, so too he liked to meet representatives of authentic traditions, or sincere seekers after truth. Thus, in London, for example, he visited the venerable Brahmin Hari Prasad Shastri, an important translator of Sanskrit texts, and the Russian Archimandrite, Fr. Anthony Bloom, who had already been to Lausanne twice and who now showed him his little church and invited him to his house. It was with the same concern for authentic encounters that Schuon had contacts with Fr. Sophronios in his old keep at St. Geneviève des Bois. On the other hand, the leader of the Japanese Jodo-Shinshu school, Shojun Bando, and various Zen masters such as Sohaku Ogata and Shinichi Hisamatsu, as well as Lobsang Lhalungpa from distant Tibet, came to see him at his home. He also had a contact with Inayat Khan, who came to seek his blessing before making a *khalwah* (spiritual retreat) in

India, and with Hâjj Omar Li, an influential member of the Tijanîya *Tariqah*; Swami Gauribala, a German who lived as a Shivaite *sadhu* in India and Ceylon for nearly thirty years after a regular correspondence with Schuon also came to visit him in Switzerland. Just as, through the intermediary of visitors, Schuon was in touch with the great Native American medicine man Black Elk, so also he had a special link with the *Jagadguru* (universal master)<sup>82</sup> of Kanchipuram, whose photograph he kept by him and to whom he dedicated his book *Language of the Self*, published in India in 1959. He also wrote a contribution<sup>83</sup> for a special volume in honor of the *Jagadguru* entitled *Shankara and Shanmata* (Madras, India, 1969).

In the course of the same year, 1954, Schuon received the visit in Lausanne of the son of Shaykh Adda Ben Tounes, the young Shaykh Al-Mahdî, and three representatives of the *tariqah* of Mostaghanem. Since Schuon's assumption of independence, relations had remained cordial but distant. Shortly before his death in 1952, Shaykh Adda had written a very friendly letter to Schuon and, in the course of the years, various visitors had kept up relations at a distance. The young Shaykh wished by his visit to reestablish the links, but he had above all the ambition of adding Schuon's European *fuqarâ* to his own *tariqah*. In a letter to a friend, Titus Burckhardt, recalling the fervent prayer gatherings that took place, wrote,

At the last *majlis* Shaykh al-Mahdî asked Shaykh 'Îsâ to give a *mudhakarâh* (sermon); but, out of modesty, the latter refused. I then proposed to Shaykh Al-Mahdî that I read one of Shaykh 'Îsâ's latest *mudhakarâh*, and Shaykh 'Îsâ allowed me to do so. When I had finished, there was at first silence; then Shaykh Al-Mahdî rose, took off his burnous and put it on Shaykh 'Îsâ's shoulders, whereupon he spoke of the companions of the Prophet, of those who lived in his time and those who lived later, and concluded that the last of them was Shaykh 'Îsâ. (letter to Paul Gervy, July 22, 1954)

But Burckhardt also mentioned his fear of a drifting into modernism which he had felt arising among the Algerian *fuqarâ*. The pan-Islamic and hegemonic approach of the young Shaykh—which was revealed only after he had left Lausanne and especially after he had reached London—did not, needless to say, receive Schuon's approval. In addition, the representatives of the Algerian *tariqah* wished Schuon and his followers to participate actively in the journal *Les Amis de l'Islam*, whose propagandist and rather simplistic contents—mixing theosophy, Sufism, and vaguely modernist philosophy—did not of course correspond at all to Schuon's and Burckhardt's interests. After several lively exchanges of letters, it quickly became apparent that the difference of views and mentalities made a continuation of any relations completely impossible.<sup>84</sup>

## ESOTERIC ECUMENICISM AND TRANSCENDENT UNITY OF RELIGIONS

Two more books appeared in 1957: *Sentiers de Gnose* (English translation 1959) and *Castes and Races* (English translation 1982). In the first of these Schuon reaffirms, besides his universalist approach, the importance of the way of knowledge, or true gnosis, which is “the point of union between the different religious languages,” and he recalls that direct intellection is in reality a “remembrance” and not an acquisition, because “the Intellect coincides in its intimate nature with the very nature of things.” Gnosis is the “language of the Self,” for

‘inwardly’ every religion is the doctrine of the one Self and its earthly manifestation, as also the way leading to the abolition of the false self, or the way of the mysterious reintegration of our ‘personality’ in the celestial prototype; ‘externally’ the religions amount to mythologies, or to be more exact, to symbolisms designed for differing human receptacles and displaying by this limitation, not a contradiction *in divinis*, but on the contrary, a mercy.<sup>85</sup>

In the last part of the book, which is devoted to Christianity, Schuon deals once again with the nature of Christian esoterism and the “Mysteries of Christ and the Virgin.”

What is striking in this work—though it becomes even more apparent subsequently<sup>86</sup>—is Schuon’s capacity to identify himself with the particular spiritual expression of a given religion, in order to restore its intimate nature.

It is no doubt this quintessential, and fundamentally esoteric, understanding that enabled him to guide disciples with different horizons without betraying any form. For several years Schuon had already undertaken to guide some Christians. This was even one of the points of disagreement with Guénon, who challenged this possibility a priori, because he did not accept the intrinsically esoteric nature of Christianity. Such was clearly not the perspective of Schuon who, following the example of numerous Oriental masters and also Christians of earlier times,<sup>87</sup> had a more universalist view of this function.<sup>88</sup> Contrary to what has been alleged, Schuon did not a priori encourage those who came to consult him to change their religion. If the great majority of his disciples entered Islam it was above all because they found in it a religion that was essential and simple and an initiatic path, without the need for priests who would inevitably be marked by modern ideas. Still, it was not uncommon for some Christian disciples, or Buddhists like Marco Pallis and Hindus like Mudumbaï Ramachandran, to attend Sufi *majâlis* in silence.

On the other hand, Schuon was always interested in the evolution of Catholicism: he judged very severely the second Vatican Council, largely agree-

ing with the traditionalists, even if he obviously could not adopt all their points of view and knew he could not expect the least gratitude from them. Thus it was that, shortly after the council, within the framework of the Catholic column of a large Swiss daily newspaper, a succession of "Letters from a Friend" appeared which, under cover of their recipient, Guy de Wurstemberger, clearly showed Schuon's intimate knowledge of the issues then at stake. Though he did not deal explicitly with these things in his books, his intransigence and condemnation of postconciliar developments never weakened.

The publication of *Stations of Wisdom* in 1958, in a collection edited by Marie-Madeleine Davy,<sup>89</sup> was the occasion for him to broach a subject to which he would often return, namely, the question of "intrinsic orthodoxy," and the relationship between the expression of truth in a given revealed form and the underlying essential, universal, and supraformal truth: "dogmatic form is transcended by fathoming its depths and contemplating its universal content, and not by denying it in the name of a pretentious and iconoclastic ideal of 'pure truth.'"<sup>90</sup> Having expressed from the start his intention to "situate in a sapiential climate the truths by which man has always lived and must continue to live" and having stressed that "the consciousness of the Absolute is the prerogative of human intelligence,"<sup>91</sup> he reaffirms the importance of prayer and the "remembrance of God," the ultimate object of this consciousness, and defines the metaphysical basis of what he calls "the stations of wisdom."<sup>92</sup>

As we have seen, Schuon had already manifested his profound interest in the American Indian world both in his writings and in his paintings. His paternal grandmother, who had lived for a year in America and had even been asked in marriage by an Indian chief, had communicated to little Frithjof and his brother her love for this ancient tradition so close to virgin Nature. Both in his relations with Black Elk and in his exchanges with other Indians through the intermediary of Joseph Epes Brown, Schuon showed his great affinity with the primordial and quintessential spirituality of the North American Plains Indians. This led him to seek direct contact with authentic representatives of this tradition, of which at that time very little notice was taken. Thus in Paris in 1953, he made the acquaintance of Thomas Yellowtail, who had been touring Europe and the Middle East with a troop of Crow dancers directed by Reginald Laubin. Struck by the authenticity of their dances and the strong personality of Yellowtail, Frithjof and Catherine Schuon, accompanied by Titus Burckhardt, were able, on a visit to Paris, to form a friendship with Yellowtail which was to be permanent. Yellowtail and his wife were even Schuon's first guests in his new house in Pully. Recalling his first meeting with Yellowtail, Burckhardt wrote, "I had never before seen a man who was both so strong and so gentle. . . . He was slow in his movements, with an almost hieratic slowness, and with an expression of serenity and power. Whenever one spoke of spiritual realities, his face would light up."<sup>93</sup> Later Thomas Yellowtail became a medicine man and leader of the

Sun Dance for all the Crow tribes. With time and distance this relationship did not fade, quite the contrary: between 1980 and his death in 1993, Yellowtail would visit his friend every year in Bloomington, Indiana.

In 1959, Schuon undertook his first journey to America,<sup>94</sup> accompanied by Paul Goble.<sup>95</sup> He went first to Pine Ridge, the famous Sioux reservation, where he met the grandson of Chief Red Cloud, who adopted him, giving him the name Wámbali Ohitika (Brave Eagle) which had been the name of his grandfather's brother; Catherine Schuon received the name Onpahi Ske Win (Antelope Teeth Woman). Then they visited the region around Pine Ridge and met other Indians including One Feather and Benjamin Black Elk, the son of Black Elk, before going on to visit the Crow, where they once again met Thomas Yellowtail and his family. Their journey ended with a visit to the Shoshone and Cheyenne tribes.

The high point of this two-month stay was their participation, as involved spectators, in a Sun Dance—a formidable cosmic drama, “a remembrance of God, a purification from the multiple and the outward, a union with the One and the Real.” This was followed by their adoption into the Lakota Sioux tribe under the aegis of Ben Chief, who gave Schuon the name Wichahpi Wiyakpa (Bright Star), while his wife received the name Wowan Winyan (Artist Woman). The leader of the ceremony said to him, “Your name is Bright Star; every time we see the morning star we shall remember you.”<sup>96</sup>

One can safely say that in all probability, Schuon was the first Shaykh of an Islamic *tarîqah* to be adopted by American Indians, and thereby affiliated with the last link in the chain of a truly primordial tradition.

One of Schuon's best-known books, *Understanding Islam*, was published in 1961 (English translation 1963). This work of synthesis is one of the few books that he ever wrote on a single subject. Very quickly appreciated in the Islamic world, it underwent many subsequent editions,<sup>97</sup> and doubtless contributed to Schuon's fame in Oriental countries. Basing itself as always on the *sophia perennis* and with an undeniable didactic sense and clarity of expression, Schuon deals in his customary manner—one that seeks to be neither documentary nor exhaustive—with the main outlines of the Islamic tradition before elucidating its metaphysical dialectic and the Sufi approach.

A short time earlier, his book *Images de l'Esprit* (on Buddhism, Yoga, and Shintoism) had been published. This book clearly shows Schuon's profound affinity with Buddhism, and particularly Zen, in whose “fascinating combination of the highest values and the greatest simplicity” he saw an expression of the *religio perennis*.<sup>98</sup> In the same vein Schuon published an article entitled “Treasures of Buddhism” shortly afterwards in *France-Asie*. In 1993, a compilation of all his writings on Buddhist themes was edited under the same title (an earlier less complete edition of this book, entitled *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, had been published in 1968).

## RELIGIO PERENNIS

Schuon and his wife returned to the United States in 1963, and again visited their Indian friends. At Wounded Knee they met Fools Crow,<sup>99</sup> the celebrated medicine man and nephew of Black Elk, who made a strong impression on them. In the course of their travels, which reaffirmed even more their love of Indian culture, they were again able to be present at a Sun Dance.

In 1968, Schuon expounded the symbolism of the Sun Dance in *Études Traditionnelles* in an article entitled "The Sun Dance," which, revised and enlarged, became a chapter in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, in which the rite is presented as an exceptional expression of "theurgic phenomenology." "The Indian world," Schuon wrote in a letter, "means first and foremost the reading of primordial doctrine in the phenomena of nature . . . and then the perception of nature as a sacred and primordial home manifesting everywhere the Great Spirit, and everywhere filled with Him."

For ten years starting in 1965, Schuon returned nearly every year to Morocco, where the still traditional ambience delighted him and where he liked to meet old *fuqarâ*.

On his first journey in March 1965, when he was going through a difficult period and in particular was suffering from asthma, the ship on which he had embarked at Marseille became, in Port-Vendres,<sup>100</sup> the setting for a very singular spiritual experience—"the great mystery which descended on me," he said much later—directly associated with the Virgin:

*Port-Vendres, wo das Schiff vor Anker lag—  
Niemals vergess ich jenen goldnen Tag.  
Ich war allein in meinem Raum; die Andern  
Wollten ein Weilchen an der Küste wandern.  
Man hatt mir einen Blumenstrauß gebracht—  
Ich blickte in der Blumen bunte Pracht  
Und dachte wie ein Kind ans Paradies;  
Da kam—ein wacher Traum—die Jungfrau süß,  
Und blieb mit mir, verborgen tief im Innern  
Mit ihrer Gnade, die mich nie verließ—  
Heilige Gegenwart, liches Erinnern.  
Ein Bild vom Himmel her; ich nenn es gern  
Die Stella Maris—meinen Morgenstern.*

Port-Vendres, where the ship lay at anchor—  
I shall never forget that golden day.  
I was alone in my room: the others  
Wanted to walk a little on the shore.



A bouquet of flowers had been brought to me—  
 I gazed into their bright splendor  
 And, like a child, thought of Paradise;  
 Then came—a waking dream—the Virgin sweet,  
 And remained, hidden deep within me,  
 With her grace, which never left me—  
 Holy Presence, luminous memory.  
 An image come from Heaven; I like to call it  
 The *Stella Maris*—my morning star.<sup>101</sup>

Ever since childhood, Schuon had had a great veneration for the Virgin Mother. And although there were never any “Marian themes” in his spiritual method, as Clavelle wrongly alleged, Schuon always had a great attachment to Sayyidatnâ Maryam, “Mother of all Prophets” and “Substance of Original Sanctity,” to quote the words of the Sufi Rûzbihân al-Bâqlî. Schuon saw in the Marian grace he had received a confirmation of the rightness of his approach. This is hardly a matter of syncretism, since Mary is venerated with fervor in Islam as one can witness, for example, at Ephesus in Turkey. But in fact it was not so much the Virgin Mary of Christianity that Schuon, from the point of view of “uncolored” gnosis, revered, but the feminine aspect—maternal and virginal—of the Logos.<sup>102</sup> Schuon saw in Sayyidatnâ Maryam the perfect symbol of Wisdom as such—essential and primordial—which, in a supraformal message of perfect sanctity, combines receptive Purity and saving Grace, or, from the point of view of spiritual method, *faqr* and *dhikr* (spiritual poverty and remembrance of God).

From that time onward his paintings, an expression of his soul, became permanently directed towards the depiction of Marian images, the inspiration for which was more Hindu and shaktic than European and Christian. Dark-skinned portrayals, symbolizing mystic night (in reference, he said, to the words “I am black but beautiful” in the Song of Solomon), hieratic and interiorized (they evoke contemplativity and beatific solitude), sometimes partly naked (in reference to the unveiling of the truth, and to liberating mercy), these images are as an echo of his inward beauty: “If I were asked why I paint images of the Holy Virgin, I would answer: to transmit, and thus make accessible to others, an inward vision; and to make possible a participation in this vision” (letter to Leo Schaya, December 27, 1982). In the same vein, Schuon wrote at that time mystical poems in Arabic in honor of the Virgin, the spirit of which resembles the Sufi poetry in which Shaykh Al-‘Alawî himself excelled.

It was also at the beginning of 1965 that Schuon dealt for the first time with what he henceforth called the *religio perennis*, in an article in *Études Traditionnelles*, which later became a chapter in *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (1968; English translation 1966).

The two-fold definition of the *religio perennis*—discernment between the Real and the illusory, and unifying and permanent concentration on the Real—also expresses the criteria of intrinsic orthodoxy for every religion and all spirituality. A civilization is integral and healthy to the extent that it is founded on the “invisible” or “underlying” religion, the *religio perennis*, that is to say, to the extent that its expressions or forms allow the Supraformal to shine through, and are turned toward the Origin, thus serving as vehicles for the remembrance of a lost Paradise, and also, a fortiori, for the presentiment of a timeless Beatitude.<sup>103</sup>

### STATIONS OF WISDOM

In 1967 Schuon turned sixty. His spiritual and intellectual influence was growing and began to extend beyond the circle of his close disciples, but his community, which was never a secret society, would remain discrete and never engaged in any proselytism.

Jean Biès, who met him at that time and who, in the journal *Epignosis*, spoke of a “quasi-inaccessible being,” sketched a remarkably accurate portrait of him:

Schuon had the face of a spiritual man: a face which one has never seen before, but which one nonetheless recognizes immediately. But can one suggest more than physical characteristics, when the essence that emanates from a being cannot be limited by any stipulation of style? A vast forehead, a short gray beard, abundant white hair brushed back, a strongly hooked nose, the long slim fingers of a pianist. One notices not so much his eyes as his gaze. His gestures are vivacious; they are ritualized to the ultimate degree: inviting someone to sit down, picking up a pen holder—these are not things to be done haphazardly. . . . He is clad in a brown jellaba and wears a scarf of light-colored fabric which falls over his arms and shoulders. During the conversation he passes a little rosary of ivory beads from one hand to the other. His capacity to welcome and attend to the other is total; he always seems deeply interested in what he is being asked, even if it is the most banal thing. He speaks with a slight Germanic accent—due to his Basle origin—and articulates his words clearly, permitting an ardent conviction, an indisputable authority, and an emphasis of majesty to shine through. He pronounces, in their original pronunciation, the Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Sanskrit words with which his discourse is studded.<sup>104</sup>

Those who have had the privilege of being personally received by Schuon can testify to his affability—he never failed to inquire after mutual acquaintances; to his generous and tolerant attention—he tirelessly repeated spiritual advice and tried to remind each one, in a world of forgetfulness, of the importance of the “remembrance of God”; to his natural majesty and authority—the movement of his head and his facial expression irresistibly evoked the image of an eagle, and the vivacity of his words, which were not without humor, were often punctuated by *n’est-ce pas?* more in a demonstrative than an interrogative sense aimed at soliciting his interlocutor’s approval. He spoke gladly of doctrine and method, but set aside with a gesture or with silence any irrelevant or superficial remarks.

Overwhelmed, a visitor once wrote:

I looked at him for a moment before bowing. . . . He himself fixed his gaze on me. Suddenly, like lightning, when I was not expecting it, it seemed to me that I had been transported in spirit into the interior of the Shaykh’s being. An extraordinary feeling of certainty overtook me. I discovered that, at the center of his being, there flowed a torrent of joy: and this “cascade of beatitude”—the impression was almost physical—fell upon me and immersed me.<sup>105</sup>

Though one must not overlook the emotions of the individual concerned, this impression of Presence and Certainty was that of many visitors. Following Leo Schaya,<sup>106</sup> Biès evoked the image of Elias, the “hidden Master,” who revivifies the primordial tradition and reveals the transcendent and unanimous Unity of the spiritual paths. Elias, according to Jewish tradition, instills his message through enlightened representatives who incarnate the “Eliatic function.” Making a link with the enigmatic figure of Al-Khidr,<sup>107</sup> who is mentioned in the Quran, Biès—who was never a disciple of Schuon—did not hesitate to say that he saw in Schuon the archetypal image of “Traditional Man.”

We must pause here to consider the mythical figure of Al-Khidr, and more particularly the question of the *afrād*, for in many respects it seems to us to shed light on Schuon’s singular, and sometimes enigmatic, personality. The mysterious Master of the *afrād* (this word is the plural of *fard*, the “isolated,” the “solitary,” the “singular”), Al-Khidr, represents in the Islamic tradition the “ever-living spiritual Master,” “the Verdant,” the true representative of quintessential esoterism (“I possess a knowledge which proceeds from Allāh and which thou canst not have,” says Al-Khidr to Moses);<sup>108</sup> it is precisely Al-Khidr’s independence with regard to forms that readily gives rise to scandal in the eyes of exoterism, and even in the eyes of the eso-exoterism deprecated by Schuon.

Ibn ‘Arabî extensively developed the question of the *afrād* in his *Futuhât al-Makkîya* (The Meccan Revelations).<sup>109</sup> Indeed, in his hagiology he explains how

in all ages God acts through the intermediary of “solitary” spiritual men—men of the élite, amongst whom the *qutb*, or “pole” of the age, often manifests himself—men who are charismatic, independent, even “amoral,” and profoundly contemplative “messengers.”

In the life and private writings of Schuon there are a number of allusions to the “solitary ones,” and to the presence of Al-Khidr. Thus in his *Memories and Meditations* he recalls the meeting, during his first stay in Mostaghanem in 1933, with a mysterious personage whom no one knew. As Schuon stood at the entrance to the *zâwiyah*, an unknown man came up to him and, “piercing him with his blue-black gaze,” took his hand in his, and said to him a few words in Arabic, adding in French: “*Vous, je vous connais depuis longtemps*” (“I have known you for a long time”); then he departed with long strides. On the eve of his departure from Algeria, Schuon saw him once again in Oran, leading the prayer in a little mosque, and giving a short *mudhakarah* (sermon) on solitude in God “which was engraved on me [Schuon] in an indelible manner . . . and made me feel a limitless trust in this mysterious man.”<sup>110</sup> Schuon asked him his name, and after a long silence the stranger replied that it was of no importance, but that people called him Ahmad.<sup>111</sup> The next day, as Schuon was preparing to make his ritual ablution, the man reappeared, greeted him with a smile and then disappeared.

In our opinion, many of Schuon’s attitudes which were not understood by some people, such as his sovereign independence with regard to formalism, his genius for the essential, and his all-inclusive taste for all manifestations of Beauty, take on a different meaning in the light of the notion of *afrâd*. From this point of view, it is significant that Schuon often speaks of that “holy solitude, that [he] longingly sought since his youth:” “A relationship with God leads to a certain solitude, because God is not the world and the world is not God; in this solitude there is a sweetness from the next world, because God is the supreme Good. It is in this sense that an old proverb says, *O beata solitudo, o sola beatitudo*” (letter to Leo Schaya, March 23, 1983).

## THE FAR WEST

Starting in the mid-1960s and up until 1975, Schuon and his wife went several times to Morocco, and especially to Chaouen, where they visited Shaykh Hassan, a biblical image of a sage, with whom Schuon spoke regarding all aspects of the Way, as well as of his Marian perspective, which greatly pleased the aged Shaykh. Shaykh Hassan predicted that Schuon would end his life in the “*Extrême-Occident*” (Far West), and that this would be propitious for him. The Schuons also went to Turkey, and especially to Ephesus, where they prayed at *Maryamana Evi*, the house of the Virgin, where Muslims as well as Christians come to pray.

With the publication in 1970 of *Logic and Transcendence*, Schuon's written work took on a new dimension. Called "radical" by Jean Borella in an important article on Schuon's writings,<sup>112</sup> it sums up in its very title the primacy that Schuon attributes to intelligence and gnosis. Perhaps for the first time, the metaphysician deploys here the full breadth of his dialectic, and brings into play a methodical criticism of the foundations of classical and modern philosophy, while at the same time expounding a remarkable traditional epistemology<sup>113</sup> that he was to develop even further in his later books, to the point of elaborating (in the words of Luc Benoist), an "essential, integral, homogeneous and sufficient doctrine, a true theosophy."<sup>114</sup> *Form and Substance in the Religions* (1975; English translation published by World Wisdom, 2002) and *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (1978; English translation 1981) fully confirmed, both in the scope of their subject matter and in the masterly way in which it was handled, the feeling of maturity that emerged from his work at that time. The latter book enabled him to define what he meant by true esoterism (gnosis or "esoterism in itself")—which, it goes without saying, is something very different from occultist fantasies.<sup>115</sup> True esoterism pierces through the veils of the different religious forms; it is "a message which is indirect, because it is universal and consequently supraformal, whereas 'spiritual loyalty' (towards the exoteric perspective practiced) is none other than the sincerity of our human relationship with God, on the basis of means which He has put at our disposal," far from any "religious nationalism."<sup>116</sup> Even if it is obvious that every spiritual community draws its legitimacy from the effective presence of a traditional form,<sup>117</sup> it is in this purified perspective, far from denominational sentimentalism, that the following later remark of Schuon belongs: "Our starting point is *Advaita Vedānta*, and not a voluntarist, individualist, and moralist anthropology, with which ordinary Sufism is unquestionably identified; and this is true, whether or not it is to the liking of those who wish our 'orthodoxy' to consist in feigning an Arabo-Semitic mentality, or falling in love with it" (letter of April 29, 1989).

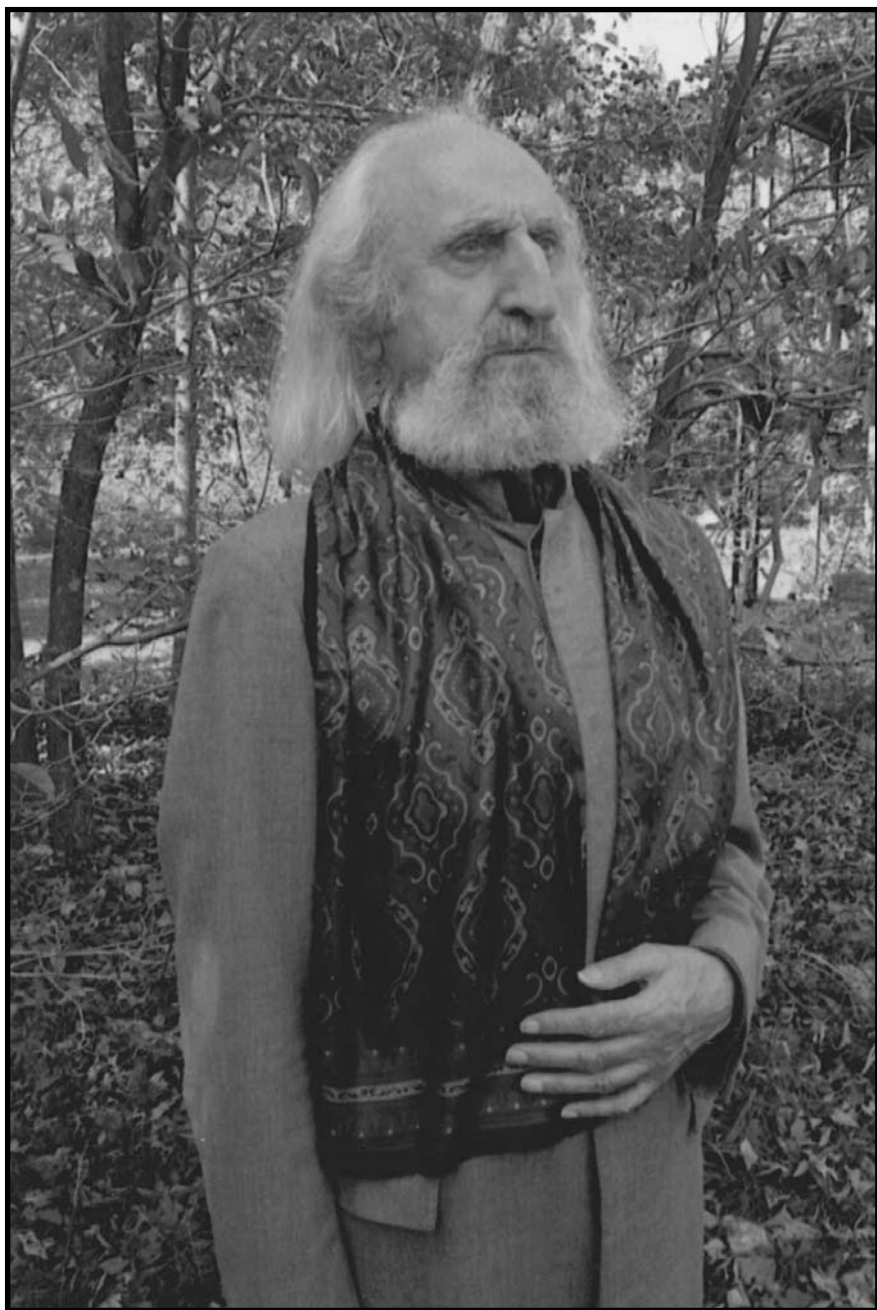
*Sufism, Veil and Quintessence* (1980; English translation 1981) also expresses this point of view. In this work, in order to set matters straight, Schuon criticizes the overemphasis of an exoteric element in the expressions of Islamic esoterism, and the encroachment of an ethnic and theological sentimentalism in the domain of pure metaphysics, which leads him to find fault with the dissonances and pious excesses that are to be found in many Sufi writings which, for want of a better expression, he describes as "average Sufism" or "mitigated esoterism," to indicate that we cannot systematically recognize in it the quality of "pure" esoterism.<sup>118</sup>

The publication shortly thereafter of *Christianity/Islam* (1981; English translation 1985), whose very explicit subtitle is *Visions of Esoteric Ecumenism*, was once again an occasion for Schuon to manifest his intimate knowledge of the two religions. Regarding this book, Jean Canteins observed "[H]is concern for objectivity comes before every other consideration."<sup>119</sup>

In September 1980, Schuon and his wife left their home in Lausanne to settle in Bloomington, Indiana, which they had visited two years earlier. It may seem surprising that at the age of nearly seventy-four, Schuon undertook to emigrate to the New World. Several factors contributed to this decision. In the space of a few years, the suburbs of Lausanne had become built-up and overpopulated, the tranquillity of the place had deteriorated, and demands from the outside world had grown. The presence of a strong American community in Bloomington, a small rural university town, the comparative ease of settling there, and, perhaps above all, the attraction of the land of the American Indians where the Schuons had always felt at ease, as well as the prospect of a place where they could live close to nature, did the rest.<sup>120</sup> In her "Memories and Anecdotes" (*Sacred Web*, 8, 2001), Catherine Schuon gave another important reason for this emigration: "The seed of Truth has been sown in the spiritual desert that is America and this is, so it seems to me, a sufficient reason for the big leap over the Atlantic Ocean which we undertook in 1980."

Schuon experienced his arrival in "Indian country"<sup>121</sup> as an unmixed happiness, a sort of "blissful dilation," he said, following an Islamic expression.<sup>122</sup> In his wooden house on the edge of a peaceful, silent forest populated by eagle and deer, he developed more than ever a taste for nature: "In the past, without wishing to be so, I was more or less, by pure habit, a man of the town; I liked old and beautiful neighborhoods, they were my dream-streets. . . . But I have now left towns behind me; destiny has translated me to the primordial world of the American Indians, and it is good thus" (letter of December 17, 1982). This departure from his native soil was to lead him, in letters to his old friends, to return to his past, in a sort of analysis and objectivization regarding himself and his life, of which an echo can be found in the extracts from those letters that we have included here.

Much has been said, wrongly and inaccurately, about the interest Schuon, who had never forgotten his "adoption" by an Indian tribe, had in Indian culture and Indian dance: "The Indian soul is, in a sense, in the air here," he noted in a letter of January 19, 1983. In fact, if he saw in the practice of Native American dances—that some of his disciples began to perform, on the occasion of Yellow-tail's visits, in an authentic and traditional way during "Indian Days"—a noble resource and a liberating support for some of them, since every form of beauty manifests the True, he never intended them as a sort of ritual practice. In a private text he explained: "Given that our perspective is essentialist, and thus universalist and primordialist, it is entirely plausible that we have fraternal relations with the world of the American Indians, which integrates Virgin Nature into religion";<sup>123</sup> this is why this world can offer to men of our time, who live "in an unhealthy universe made of artificiality, ugliness, and pettiness, a refreshing breath of primordiality and grandeur."<sup>124</sup> Fundamentally a Vedantist, Schuon had nothing in common with the primordialist pseudomysticism with which some



*Schuon in Bloomington, 1990. Personal collection, Catherine Schuon.*

have occasionally attempted to label him. "True primordiality," he wrote, "is the *Fitrah*, the original nature which we carry within ourselves, and which we also must be, according to the Divine Intention." Here he makes explicit reference to the Quranic expression: "Turn thy face towards Religion [in the manner] of a *hanîf*, in conformity with the primordial Nature (*Fitrah*) in which God created men: one must not exchange this creation (this nature) for another. This is the immutable Religion: but the majority of men know it not" (*Surah Al-Rûm*, XXX).

During the first years in America, a whole series of books appeared, enriching the metaphysical corpus that is the basis of Schuon's work. *From the Divine to the Human* (1981; English translation 1982), rather like *Logic and Transcendence*, presents itself as a "survey of metaphysics and epistemology." Jean Borella, reviewing it in *Études Traditionnelles* (January–March 1982), wrote, "There are scarcely any works in which trust in the demands of the intelligence is pushed further. . . . In all the works of this master, there is an 'audacious logic' and a rare freedom. . . ." And, speaking of Schuon's "intellectual style," he had this apt expression: "We would readily call it 'spherical,' because he instills the maximum meaning into the minimum of words."

Even more concise were *In the Tracks of the Perennial Religion* (1981) and *Summary of Integral Metaphysics* (1985). In English, the contents of these two books were combined under the title of *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (1986). Once again, these writings sought, beyond all religious controversy, to delineate the contours of true metaphysics, esoterism and the underlying *religio perennis*.<sup>125</sup> Reviewing the second book in *Aurore*, Jean Hani declared, "It is a little masterpiece . . . which, if I may say so, should be in everyone's pocket. . . . It is characterized on each page by great condensation; every sentence is a synthesis of doctrine."<sup>126</sup>

The next book was *Approaches to the Religious Phenomenon* (1984; published in English in 1989 as *In the Face of the Absolute*). Reviewing this book in *Atlantis*, R. A. Ninck wrote, "In reading this book, I never wavered in my admiration for the finesse and balance of Schuon's words."

Shortly after his eightieth birthday, yet another book appeared: *To Have a Center* (1988; English translation 1990). On this book, Jean Hani commented, "By the power and transparency of its thought—faithful echo of a suprahuman teaching—it is truly a 'light on the way' for the discerning reader." For the first time, in a long chapter on traditional anthropology entitled "To Have a Center," Schuon expounds with his customary freedom of expression, his notion of "genius"<sup>127</sup> as a phenomenon seeking to compensate for the impoverishment of the modern ambience, and he demonstrates an unexpected classical culture in painting, poetry, and literature.

Almost simultaneously, in 1984 and 1985, in two collective works (*Dossier H René Guénon* (published by L'Âge d'Homme, Lausanne) and *René Guénon* (published by Les Cahiers de l'Herne, Paris), Schuon—to the great displeasure of



some, who henceforth showed persistent animosity towards him—expressed his criticisms of certain of Guénon's theses, while at the same time expressing his perception of Guénon himself as a "'pneumatic,' of gnostic or *jñānic* type." The first of these articles, as we have seen, had its origins in private notes written in the past. Severe and abrupt, it pointed out the weaknesses or "flaws" which Schuon discerned in Guénon's work. Even though some might regret that in publishing these reflections twenty five years later Schuon did not soften their form,<sup>128</sup> there is no question of the timeliness of their publication: Schuon did not want to have attributed to him *ad vitam aeternam* and systematically, as Massignon had earlier done, certain of Guénon's ideas with which he could not identify.

The controversy unleashed by this article led the Schuonians to leave *Études Traditionnelles*, its publisher considering that it could henceforth only cater to Guénonians "of strict observance." This departure, which in due course sealed the fate of the journal, resulted in the birth of a new journal under the initiative of Leo Schaya, Jean Borella, and Jean Canteins entitled *Connaissance des Religions*. It must be said that Schuon was rather doubtful as to the possibility of the success of a new journal, for which he had no wish, though he nevertheless agreed to contribute to it.

About the same time, Seyyed Hossein Nasr published in the United States a valuable collection of selected texts, *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*,<sup>129</sup> for which he wrote a long introduction. "The writings of Frithjof Schuon are characterized by essentiality, universality, and comprehensiveness. . . . Schuon possesses the gift of reaching the very core of the subject he is treating, of going beyond forms to the essential formless Center of forms, whether they be religious, artistic or related to certain features and traits of the cosmic or human orders."

Another work, *The Feathered Sun*, with an introduction by Thomas Yellowtail, and illustrated with paintings by Schuon on Native American themes, was published, also in the United States, in 1990. Then in France, in quick succession, there appeared *Les Perles du Pèlerin* (1990; English translation: *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*, 1992) and *Roots of the Human Condition* (1990; English translation 1991). The first of these, published on the initiative of Thierry Béguelin, is a collection of extracts, many previously unpublished, concerning virtue, beauty, the sacred, and the spiritual life in general. In his back cover presentation to the second of these books, Pierre-Marie Sigaud speaks of its "admirable limpidity and rigor. Schuon restores to phenomena their metaphysical transparency and intelligibility, and leads us to perceive Divine Reality through the 'signs' and 'traces' that manifest it."<sup>130</sup>

Incidentally—and, from more than one point of view, demonstrating something of a premonition—one of the chapters of this book, entitled "Cosmic Shadows and Serenity," is devoted to the problem of evil. In it he says:

It is necessary to accept 'God's Will' when evil may enter into our destiny and cannot possibly be avoided; indeed the partially paradoxical

nature of All-Possibility requires of man an attitude of conformity to this situation, namely the quality of serenity, of which the sky above us is the visible sign. Serenity is to keep oneself so to speak above the clouds, in the calm and coolness of emptiness and far from the dissonances of this lower world.<sup>131</sup>

It is only too true that, as Schiller said, “the world seeks to blacken what shines and to drag into the dust what is sublime,” for, shortly afterwards, Schuon had to face a crucifying ordeal (“a nightmare,” he called it). In 1991, a person who had become a member of the American group tried to accuse Schuon of gestures alleged to be the “fondling” of three young girls during gatherings. Despite the improbability of the accusation, the absence of the supposed victims on one of the dates indicated, the repeated and vigorous denials of the alleged victims, and some twenty-six opposing testimonies, the plaintiff persisted in maintaining his allegations against all the evidence. A preliminary investigation was begun, until finally the chief prosecutor, dismissing his deputy from the case and taking it into his own hands, concluded that there was no proof (his exact words were, “There is not one shred of evidence”); he noted furthermore, that the plaintiff was of extremely dubious character, it having been discovered that four years earlier, criminal charges were filed in California against him for battery on a woman and that he therefore had to undergo a year of psychiatric treatment. The prosecutor declared that there were no grounds for prosecution, and the local press made amends.<sup>132</sup> Despite his age—he was then eighty-four—and his heart problems, Schuon showed throughout the ordeal a detachment and serenity in every respect worthy of his writings.

Curiously, in his day, Shri Rāmāna Maharshi—and he is far from being the only one<sup>133</sup>—was also faced with similar accusations on the part of a former disciple, and a similar course of events took place.<sup>134</sup> The plaintiff against Schuon lost his case, but continued his campaign of defamation with the neurotic and obsessive hatred characteristic of certain tenebrous individuals. When one is unfamiliar with the atmosphere of ashrams, monasteries, or spiritual communities, one may be astonished by the presence of such people in the proximity of spiritual masters. In his memoirs, Vijayānanda, an elderly French disciple of Ma Ānanda Mayi, also recalls these *bhuta* (bad spirits), these “impossible people,” always critical, mediocre, psychopathic, or paranoid, for whom the light has an irresistible attraction, and of whom the entourage of this great Indian saint was also far from exempt.<sup>135</sup>

## THE SWAN SONG

Schuon’s cycle of purely metaphysical expositions now seemed to have come to an end. However, two more books were still to appear: *The Play of Masks* (1992)

and *The Transfiguration of Man* (1995), the last books of metaphysics to be published during Schuon's lifetime.<sup>136</sup>

Referring to the "saving barque of prayer," Schuon stresses that "man is 'condemned' to transcendence,"<sup>137</sup> for his vocation is "the consciousness of the Absolute," and "the consciousness of the Real implies all that we are."<sup>138</sup> "Metaphysical understanding must nevertheless be accompanied by a sense of beauty," for "truth, that is to say, Reality, is the essence of beauty." "Beauty has something appeasing and dilating in it, something consoling and liberating, because it communicates a substance of truth, of evidence and of certitude, and it does so in a concrete and existential mode."<sup>139</sup> Thus it is that "beauty, actualized by the visual or auditive perception . . . is the equivalent of a 'remembrance of God,' if it is balanced by the 'remembrance of God' properly so which on the contrary demands the extinction of the perceptible."<sup>140</sup> "The perception of visible theophany demands unitive interiorization."<sup>141</sup>

One will understand nothing of Schuon's teachings if one is unaware of the importance for him of the sacred and the beautiful, and his inclination—as with every "visual" type, towards anything that manifests Beauty as such.<sup>142</sup> An important part of his message is the following: in a centrifugal world of mediocrity and ugliness, the contemplation of beauty is a concrete response, a source of interiorization, a door to the True.

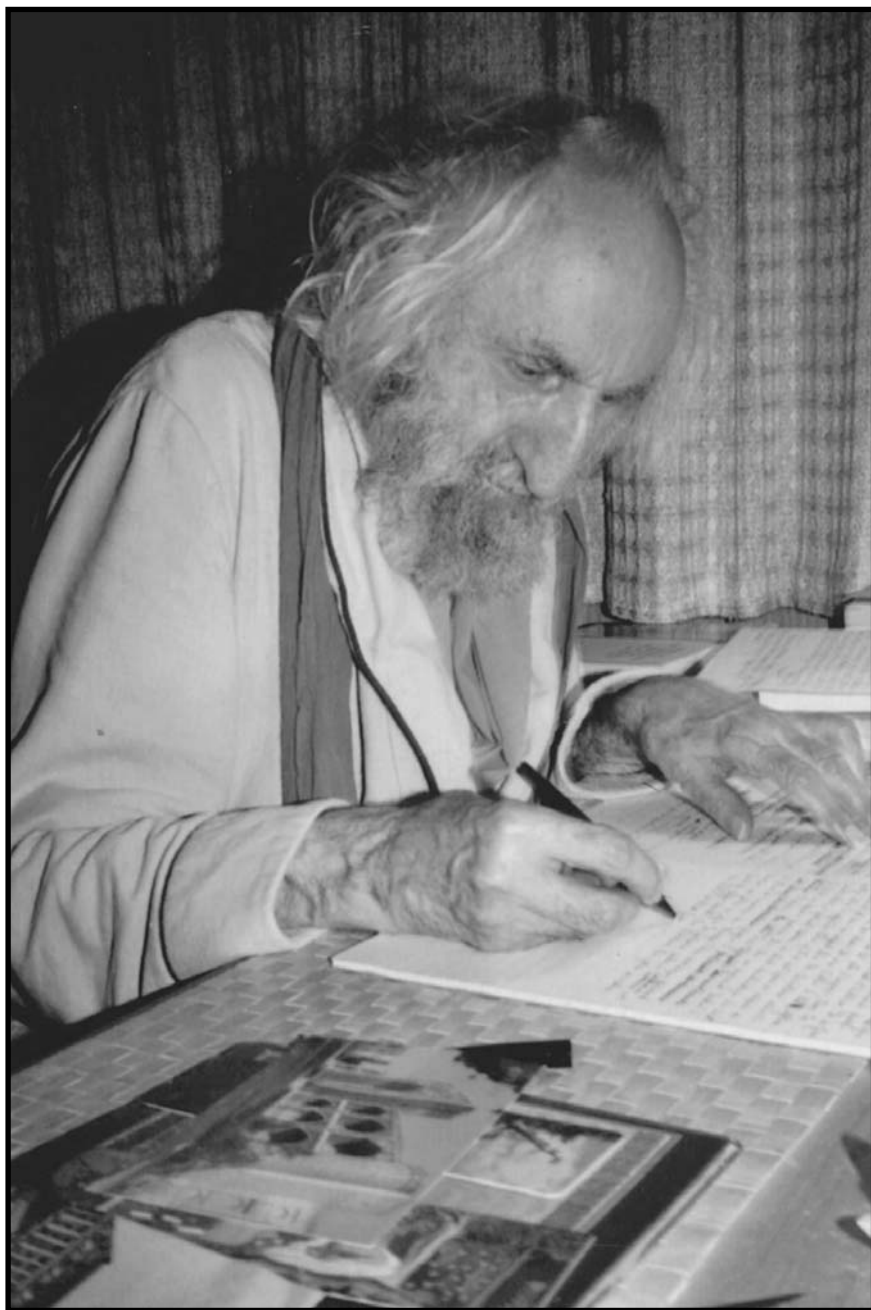
During the last three years of his life, in an almost uninterrupted flow, and, one is tempted to say, almost in spite of himself, Schuon—returning to his native tongue—produced quite unexpectedly a long cycle of poems in German. Combining reminiscences and spiritual instruction, this cycle of more than three thousand poems<sup>143</sup> is an astonishing "swan song" in which the metaphysician "gives voice to his essence."<sup>144</sup>

"Poets," said Gustave Thibon, "are metaphysicians in the raw. . . . Poetry expresses truths higher than philosophy, for it incorporates what would seem to be incoherence."<sup>145</sup>

On March 12, 1998, Schuon writes a last "song without a name" which closes his poetical cycle less than two months before his death:

*Ich wollte dieses Buch schon lang beschliessen—  
Ich konnte nicht; ich musste weiter dichten.  
Doch diesmal legt sich meine Feder nieder,  
Denn es gibt anderes Sinnen, andere Pflichten;  
Wie dem auch sei, was wir auch mögen tun:  
Lasst uns dem Ruf des Höchsten Folge leisten—*

*Lasst uns in Gottes tiefem Frieden ruhn.*



*Schuon at his desk, 1998. Personal collection, Catherine Schuon.*

I have wished for long to end this book—  
I could not do so; I had to go on writing poems.  
But this time my pen lies down,  
For there are other preoccupations, other duties;  
Be that as it may, whatever we may wish to do:  
Let us be obedient to the call of the Most High.

Let us rest in God's deep peace.

Frithjof Schuon died on May 5, 1998 at the dawn of a new day.

Seated, invoking the Divine Name, he passed away peacefully. Taken to his last resting place by a large number of friends, who had come from all over the world, he reposes today in the forest he so much loved.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Spiritual Portrait

*All my thoughts speak of love.*

—Dante, *Vita Nuova*

Having sketched a biography of Frithjof Schuon in the previous chapter, we would like to devote ourselves here to describing the contours of the complex spiritual personality of this extraordinary man.

If one perceives throughout his written work the exceptional scope of the metaphysician, one also senses, as the Thomist writer Bernard Kelly emphasized in 1954, that Schuon “speaks of Grace as one in whom it is operative and as it were in virtue of that operation.”<sup>1</sup> Evidently an underlying experience transfigures the simple literal meaning of the words.

It is plain to see in all his writings that Schuon was “vocationally a *bâtinî*,”<sup>2</sup> a man of “the Inward.” From his astonishing adolescent poems to his hundreds of texts on method intended for his disciples, as well as in his voluminous correspondence, his twenty books and his last poems, Schuon, in short, speaks of the Truth and Beauty of God, of the transcendence and immanence of the Principle—and he does so from the heart.

#### PNEUMATIKOS

The deeply mystical<sup>3</sup> temperament of the tormented adolescent that was the young Schuon shows through in almost every line of what remains to us from the personal notebooks<sup>4</sup> that he kept: “I am now experiencing the wonderful, peaceful and powerful gravity of the entry into manhood. I also feel how I am merging into the ‘Thou’; I mostly have an awareness that I am not really there as ‘I,’ that I am an impersonal eye in which the course of the world is mirrored,” he wrote in 1923.<sup>5</sup>

Even if confusion and bitterness, felt after the death of his father and his departure from his homeland, submerged his soul in an indescribable sadness that came out in some poems and sketches of his youth, a flame always seemed to shine in the secret depths of his being: "I long for repose, beauty, purity, sun. I no longer have any passion for the gloomy and the tormented. I want only Truth and Light" (1924).<sup>6</sup>

He was only sixteen when he wrote "I await my inner rebirth"<sup>7</sup> and scarcely older when he noted, "I am more certain than ever that I must leave everything and live in solitude among strangers. Only in this way can the inner rebirth to which I aspire take place" (1924).<sup>8</sup> Several years later he wrote to his friend Johann Jakob Jenny:

I endlessly contemplate the Infinite. In the day it embraces my soul like a rhythm coming from the depths of the sea. I do not forget it in my sleep; it is like a divine gaze that is permanently upon me in a fresh silence. This is what will transform by His Will the impure recipient that I am. It suffices that man closes himself to the ephemeral and opens to the Infinite so that it may flow into him. I would like my life to be . . . an omnipresent rest in the Ultimate, in the silent white heights, where no deafening sound, no suffocating heaviness, no wavering doubt can reach me.<sup>9</sup>

During his military service he expressed all his malaise to his friend and confidante, Lucy von Dechend: "The rocky mountains! the desert! the virgin forest! the ocean! Where am I? Why must everything be painful, bitter, and hard for me? One day the dance will be over and I shall sleep among the stars. Who will come with me when I go among the stars?" (letter of November 15, 1927). Shortly thereafter, however, he confided to his correspondent:

When you have seen the Divine face to face you have no more taste for anything else; as is its nature, the Divine demands of us all that we are; it tolerates no associate—that is the first thought of monotheism. However, you cannot ask anyone to give his all without knowing why; that is why my motto is: I cannot want the Ultimate without knowing it, nor can I know it without wanting it. Wanting and knowing are thus in the sight of God one and the same attitude. One renounces many things if one knows with certainty that there is nothing above God, and that nothing exists alongside Him. (letter to Lucy von Dechend, December 1927)

Just over a year later he explained to Jenny:

I have already told you that I feel Hindu, like a branch of this soul or of this spirituality, which spreads from the burning *Gopurams* of the Ganges to the red-gold shadows of the silent *Gompas* from whom the secret atmosphere exhales the perfume of Agarthā, as far as Angkor Wat and to the Shivaite harmony of Mongolia and Cambodia, and which is still alive in pious Bali. This kinship is a fact and not a voluntary monomania; it corresponds to natural laws, to an elective affinity. Especially in the face of the poorness of our civilization, such phenomena of psychic and spiritual uprooting are evident, for in our narrow world there is only space for materialistic, democratic, theophobic, and inwardly torn barbarians.<sup>10</sup>

In the manner of Plotinus, who wished “to flee alone to the Alone,” he soon dreamed of nothing more than to flee the modern world, and saw no other way out than to leave a West in which he decidedly did not find his place: “Perhaps I shall evaporate like a song never heard. The West has rolled over me like a wheel and broken my ribs. Now there are no more concessions, there is nothing more than the Supreme Solitary, the Lord of the living and the dead” (letter to Albert Oesch, February 21, 1932).

Many years later, Schuon was to speak of “the imprescriptible vocation of the contemplative—of the ‘pneumatic’ whose spiritual ascent results from his very substance and not from a choice or conversion as in the case of the ‘psychic.’”<sup>11</sup> By using the terms “pneumatic” and “psychic,” which he borrowed from the gnosticism of Valentinus,<sup>12</sup> Schuon indirectly casts light on his own spiritual nature. There is no doubt that in defining the pneumatic he is describing in fact a spiritual state that he recognizes as his own. Thus in recalling the case of Pope Celestine V, he says, “A ‘pneumatic’ is a being who is attracted by Heaven in a ‘supernaturally natural’ manner. . . . The ‘pneumatic’ lives on the memory of a lost paradise; he seeks only one thing, a return to his origin.”<sup>13</sup> Speaking elsewhere of Guénon, he again notes (and this resonates more than ever as a definition he identifies with):

the pneumatic is in a certain way the incarnation of a spiritual archetype, meaning that he was born with a state of consciousness which, for others, would be precisely the goal and not the point of departure; the pneumatic does not “advance” toward something “other than himself”; he stays in place so as to become fully himself—namely his archetype—by progressively eliminating veils or outer coverings, shackles contracted by the environment, possibly also by heredity. He eliminates them by means of ritual supports—“sacraments,” if you will—without forgetting meditation and prayer; but his situation is



nonetheless quite different from that of ordinary men, prodigiously gifted though they may be. On the other hand, it is necessary to know that the “born gnostic” is, by nature, more or less independent, not only with regard to the letter, but also with regard to the law, which moreover does not simplify his relations with the environment, either psychologically or socially.<sup>14</sup>

He then concludes, “the pneumatic realizes or actualizes what he *is* while the nonpneumatic realizes what he *must become*. This joins the definition that Guénon himself gave of the *jnâni* as the being that “‘becomes’ whatever it knows and realizes itself through that knowledge.”<sup>15</sup>

However, it was perhaps in one of his last books that Schuon best described the situation of “the man-center, who is determined by the intellect and is . . . rooted in the Immutable” or of the “inner man” of Eckhart, who suffers “in his temporal humanity, while remaining impassive in his immortal kernel, which coincides with his state of union with God.”<sup>16</sup> Emphasizing the “isolation” of the contemplative in the world, he has this formula: “[T]he pneumatic is a man who identifies a priori with his spiritual substance and thus always remains faithful to himself; he is not a mask unaware of its wearer, as is the man enclosed in accidentality.”<sup>17</sup>

His intimate conviction that he was a “born pneumatic”—a state which remains virtual as long as inner suffering, the spiritual path, initiatic attachment, and the practice of prayer do not actualize it<sup>18</sup>—explains in large part the young Frithjof Schuon’s desperate quest for a spiritual rebirth,<sup>19</sup> which led him to seek the answer to his questions in the East. In a letter written shortly before leaving Mostaghanem, he confides, “I would like to get up and go away when I hear that Sound, afar, carrier of light, ineffably sweet, that the winds of the lost paradises bring me. I would like to throw away everything, break everything, to take to the highways. Whither? To that which is secret, forgotten. I am the man without a country, the lover, the faithful. My homeland is not of this world” (letter to Lucy von Dechend, February 10, 1933). It is not without relevance that precisely when Schuon went to Mostaghanem for the second time, Montherlant wrote in *Service inutile*, “The greatest adventures are inward ones.”

By his personal attitudes which bore the imprint of dignity,<sup>20</sup> by his refusal to compromise with the whims of the times, with all “casualness,” Schuon would always manifest with regard to himself an unflinching discipline. Some people, confusing nobility and self-respect with pride,<sup>21</sup> sometimes believed they had detected a lack of humility in this inflexible rigor, although with him it was in fact only the consciousness, from moment to moment, of his spiritual nature and his relationship to God. “The sage lives at the summit of himself,” says Plotinus. To know oneself, spiritually speaking, is not to abase oneself falsely but “to be conscious of one’s limitations and to attribute all quality to God.”<sup>22</sup>

In reality, the person of Schuon often calls to mind the figure of an ancient sage rather than the saccharine image of a plaster saint that recent centuries have fashioned in the Western imagination. Pierre Hadot, an enlightened authority on the ancient world, has defined the sage as manifesting “absolute independence and absence of need.”<sup>23</sup> One can read in this a definition of Schuon himself. This is also the Hindu perspective according to which the *jñānī*, as Father Le Saux wrote, “is he who has penetrated to the source and recognized in the secret of himself the mystery of God and his epiphany. In truth he alone possesses and he alone can really give; he alone can totally love. Only that which lies apart ever irradiates.”<sup>24</sup>

### SPIRITUAL MASTER, METAPHYSICIAN AND FEDELE D'AMORE

The Vedantic ternary *Sat-Cit-Ânanda* (Being, Consciousness, Beatitude) is a key concept, as Schuon has quite justly highlighted, that may serve in “the most diverse orders.”<sup>25</sup> He has himself used this concept to define the spiritual Master who must represent and transmit “first a reality of ‘Being’ (*Sat*), second a reality of intelligence or ‘truth’ (*Cit*), and third a reality of ‘love, union, or happiness’ (*Ânanda*).”<sup>26</sup>

From an outward point of view, Schuon appears to possess the sole traits of the spiritual master and the metaphysician, a function or state that one may without difficulty connect with *Sat* and with *Cit*. But more intimately, he also assumes what we will call, lacking another word to translate the Arabic word *‘āshiq* (lover [of God]), the quality of *fedele d’amore* in the oldest and fullest sense of the term.<sup>27</sup> This third aspect, which we will explain later, expresses the notion of *Ânanda*. It is the harmonious conjunction of these three dimensions that makes up the very uniqueness of Schuon.

His dimension of pure metaphysician as expressed especially in his books—the preponderant dimension, since he readily emphasizes that “my message is in my books”—is evidently that which concerns the greatest number of people. It is also that which makes for the greatest unanimity. His function of spiritual master—“his reality of being”—on the contrary concerns only the restricted circle of his disciples. The least one might say is that he never sought to enlarge it, always preaching discretion and rejecting all proselytizing.<sup>28</sup> Finally, his state of *fedele d’amore* identifies essentially with his own spiritual life. Analogously, we would be tempted to say that the metaphysical dimension appears in his work as the circumference or periphery of the sphere of his personality, whereas his state of spiritual master appears as a radius issued from the heart of the sphere, and that the state of *fedele d’amore* is mingled with the very center of his being. It is this state of *‘āshiq* that irradiates all his work from within and grants him all his strength of persuasion. These three aspects of the man are undoubtedly

inseparable, which is why it would be wrong to intend, through convenience or mental laziness, to distinguish, for example, the message from the messenger. As Angelus Silesius said, "[T]he circumference is within the point, and the fruit within the seed."<sup>29</sup>

Symbolically, Schuon's traditional name (ʿĪsā Nūr ad-Dīn Ahmad) also reflects this three-dimensionality. To the name ʿĪsā (as the Quran calls Jesus son of Mary, ʿĪsā ibn Maryam) corresponds the spiritual mastery of an essentially esoteric nature, as illuminated by Marian grace—the expression of formless wisdom to which Schuon bears witness—which would become a major theme of his spiritual teaching.<sup>30</sup>

To his name Nūr ad-Dīn (Light of the Tradition) given to him by the Shaykh Al-ʿAlawī, may be deemed to correspond his metaphysical work,<sup>31</sup> the expression of his exceptional intellective capacity. And finally, to the name Ahmad (the Praised)<sup>32</sup> corresponds the state of *fedele d'amore*, all the more so in that this name is also the heavenly name of Prophet Muhammad, Sayyid al-ʿĀshiqīn, prince of the *fedeli d'amore*, according to one of the most beautiful Sufi traditions.<sup>33</sup> It could also be noted that the two names that he received from Indians during the 1950s (*Wambali Ohitika*, or Brave Eagle, and *Wicahpi Wiyakpa*, or Bright Star) also refer to the *Sat* and *Cit* aspects. In his Memoirs Schuon indicates that the name Bright Star evokes two things for him: "Firstly the 'shining star' (*kawkab durri*) mentioned in the Verse of Light in the Koran, and secondly the name of the Holy Virgin, *Stella Matutina*," that is, the aspects *Cit* and *Ānanda*.

If one wished to go deeper still, one could add to the Vedantic ternary the three forms of expression that his teaching took.

Hundreds of texts on method written for his disciples,<sup>34</sup> as well as his vast correspondence—which were to serve at times as the wefts for certain developments in his books, which confirms their aspect of unitive "rays" if one recalls the image of the sphere—relate essentially to spiritual mastery, and thus his books properly belong within the sphere of his function of metaphysician; and his thousands of poems, just like his paintings, which express his most intimate personality, relate rather to his quality of *fedele d'amore*.

His life even may be arranged in periods wherein one of the three dimensions is successively affirmed—but not in an absolutely exclusive way.

Very briefly,<sup>35</sup> one may consider that in effect the first forty years of his life—essentially marked by his spiritual quest and then by his initiation (January 1933), the "descent" of the Divine Name (July 1934), the investiture "from on high" of spiritual mastery, and finally the "inspiration" (which one may qualify as *nafath al-Rûh*, "breathing out" of the Spirit) in relation to his spiritual method (December 1942)—are as though dominated by the expression of *Sat*, while the next forty years—beginning in 1948 with the publication of his first book in

French (*De l'Unité transcendante des Religions*), the real beginning of his work at the very moment it was detached from strict Guénonian influence—appear as marked by the seal of *Cit* or metaphysical formulation. The manifestation of his intellectual consciousness became preponderant at this time and found expression in some twenty works in which, with a didactic and synthetic talent all his own, he succeeded in surveying the whole field of religious thought. And in effect the last ten years of his existence—when the major part of his poetry, expression of “mental beauty,” was written and when he revealed his taste for the contemplation of dance, the expression of “corporeal beauty in action”<sup>36</sup>—were above all the manifestation of Beatitude, Love, *Ânanda*, and marked a return to the center of his being,<sup>37</sup> the essential having been said. “He who has chosen the Center as his abode circumscribes at one glance the circumference,” says Angelus Silesius.

In one of his last poems, Schuon writes:

Autumn leaves—what does this image mean?  
 Poems arrive late to my ear,  
 I know not how—their source is Light and Love—  
*Tutti li miei penser parlan d'Amore.*

He added, “Autumn leaves are like gold that gives itself.”<sup>38</sup>

### PILGRIM OF THE ABSOLUTE

Clearly Schuon's sense of the authentic and the sacred as well as his rejection of the modern world and its deleterious ambience led him to the side of Shaykh Ahmad Al-'Alawî at the end of 1932.<sup>39</sup> Thus he left a Catholicism, which he had joined some eleven years earlier upon his arrival in France, that seemed unable, in the Guénonian perspective that was at that time his own, to answer to his expectations. Guénon had written to him, “I am also more and more persuaded that the forms which constitute Christianity are actually incapable of furnishing an effective support for a restoration of the traditional spirit” (letter of December 22, 1931) after having specified in his first letter, “As for the adherence to an Oriental tradition, it is certain that not only is Islam the form the least distant from the West, it is also the only one for whom the question of origin need not be posed in any way and can never constitute an obstacle” (letter of June 5, 1931). Having neither the sentiment nor the will to repudiate Christianity, Schuon in fact did not mean to convert to Islam as such but sought through Sufism to be connected to a sapiential or *jnanic* way.<sup>40</sup> “I wished to live in God,” he confided in 1947 to the son of Hehaka Sapa (Black Elk):

I wished not only to love God, I wished also to know Him, and the Christianity of our time teaches only the love of God, never the knowledge. I knew, moreover, very soon that God would charge me with a mission. And so, with regard to the knowledge of God which I was seeking—because it is a need of my nature, and God wishes to be worshipped by every man according to the nature He gave him—I found this sacred knowledge through a holy man of the Arab people, whose name was Ahmad Al-‘Alawī. He was a spiritual Master and had many disciples. There I found what I was searching for: the knowledge of God, and the means to realize God.<sup>41</sup>

Thus Islam also offered to him a traditional framework, an “ambience,” a “religion at once essential and simple.” But of what he would call the “message of Shaykh Al-‘Alawī,” who initiated him into Sufism, he retained above all “the primacy of invocation and *khalwah*,” that is, of the *dhikr* and the spiritual retreat, which until the end of his days were to be found among the central themes of his teaching and his life. From that time on, his spiritual life took on another dimension, and the mystical expectation of his early youth was henceforth succeeded by a gnostic deepening of the way.

On July 11, 1934, on the very day on which his master died, he recounted that he underwent a vibrant spiritual experience—an “inner transfiguration that submerged me like an ocean” as he would write to Hans Kury (letter of July 15, 1934)—which gave him the conviction, throughout the actualization of the Divine Name that was then produced in him, that he was receiving part of the “spiritual inheritance” of his old master.<sup>42</sup>

Schuon had, when very young, found imbedded in the deepest part of himself the certainty of being charged with a particular spiritual mission and he already felt himself invested with a moral obligation toward those who, having already discerned in him an exceptional nature, had already attached themselves to him and followed or listened to him.<sup>43</sup> In one of his first letters to Guénon, speaking of his desire to leave everything and depart “far from this haunted earth,” to “abandon [him]self to the Divine” with no hope of returning, he wrote, “Such an initiative will be grave also for those who think they do well, perhaps wrongly, to depend intellectually on me, those who, although they only see me rarely during their visits, hope in me and whose attitudes depend on mine” (letter of February 20, 1932).

In 1936, one year after the *khalifah* Adda ben Tounes had conferred the function of *muqaddam* on him during his second stay in Mostaghanem, and well after passing through some inner trials, Schuon would become in turn a spiritual guide. An investiture “from on high” which he will say came to him too early—he was barely twenty-nine years old—but with regard to which he thought he “did not have a choice.”

The inventory of the difficulties and disappointments Schuon would encounter throughout his life in the exercise of his role as spiritual master,<sup>44</sup> despite the consolations he was also given, remains to be dealt with. Vanity,<sup>45</sup> religious ignorance, the spiritual decline of modern men and the profane climate with which they were imbued, often required a quasi-reconstruction of being. Moreover, the Western individualist was ignorant of "spiritual paternity." The idea of *guru* or *shaykh* was almost unknown to him.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from his friends from the early days, his disciples at that time were often readers of Guénon, who sought above all an initiation in the quasi-administrative sense that Guénon seemed to lend it;<sup>47</sup> now Schuon's teaching also speaks of prayer, virtues, morality, and beauty. Some among them who were older than Schuon thought that initiatic affiliation in itself was a kind of accomplishment, whereas it is in fact only an opened door. Others were passionately attached to the Islamic form, often misunderstanding their master's essentially esoteric approach. Guénon, despite his determination not to have disciples ("There is no misfortune worse than having disciples;" "I would never have wanted to have any, not for anything in the world!" he would write to Lings on July 26, 1950), could not abandon a certain desire to arbitrate, which did not make an apprenticeship any easier, all the more so that some people had no notion of the nature of a spiritual master and the abandon that it requires from a disciple. Now, "faith (in the Master) is indispensable on the part of the disciple; without faith there is no spiritual continuity, and thus no bridging of 'hells,' nor any possible victory over the *ego*."<sup>48</sup>

Even though Schuon was no psychotherapist appealing to his disciples' confidence and, in the manner of masters of old, could sometimes be rather severe, he would give of his full attention to those who wanted to follow him. He taught tirelessly the way of "quintessential prayer," the path of the heart and of inwardness, and his contribution to method, which he was not to bring out fully until some years later, was already decisive for most of his disciples.

From the point of view that we present here, it is difficult to pass over in silence Schuon's extraordinary and unfortunate love for the woman we will call Magdaliyah, his "noble and beautiful" but inconstant friend who would be, beginning in 1933 and for over ten years, the Lady of his heart. The photographs from that time give us a radiant image of this young beauty, "calm and proud," with whom Schuon fell in love at first sight. He prayed that God would help him in the conquest of his much beloved Lady, but she, timid as a bird, approached him<sup>49</sup> and then shied away from him without ever giving herself to him. "The illusion of existence, instead of seducing me in the form of a multitude of petty satisfactions, is concentrated for me in the person of a noble and beautiful woman," he wrote (letter of November 1942). This love, total and Platonic, very refined and extremely spiritualized, led him to a veritable "spiritual death."<sup>50</sup> An unconscious mediator, Magdaliyah would be his Beatrice.<sup>51</sup>



this nature is not turned toward the world at all. Outside that which is my inner law, I have long struggled in vain." He later wrote in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, "At bottom, every love is a search for the Essence or the lost Paradise."<sup>53</sup>

"For the essentially contemplative man," he would write subsequently in one of his books, "the invisible is the reality, whereas 'life is a dream'; for him the Platonic sense of beauty replaces brute passion," so that "[the man of intellectual type]<sup>54</sup> can experience attachments in the function of transparent heavenly realities in their earthly reflections."<sup>55</sup>

This painful birthing of his spiritual personality, this "ascent to the depths of the Heart," as Henri Le Saux calls it, was also the confirmation of his role of spiritual master;<sup>56</sup> it crowned and concluded what we may consider the first phase of his life, which was also marked by the birth of his metaphysical opus that would henceforth be affirmed without concession.

## WISDOM AND METAPHYSICS

All his work is there to prove that Schuon was a born metaphysician, and the dispassionate study of this work will show that it belongs to those of the great spiritual authors of the twentieth century and, in fact, of all times.<sup>57</sup>

The clarity of Schuon's teaching is undeniable. Even if he feels no need to develop his elucidations by relying on a learned apparatus of notes filled with references, one will not take Schuon to task: everything he puts forth can be verified. A self-taught genius, somewhat as the Prophet Muhammad was "illiterate," he has not been modeled upon any university teaching and it is this lightness, this freedom of tone, this spontaneity issuing directly from the living source, that is the initial fascination in his writings.

Until the dawn of the twentieth century, the reciprocal knowledge of the metaphysics and theologies of the world's different religious systems was relatively limited and often largely inaccurate. The Orientalists' efforts at understanding—often compromised by a misunderstanding of their own religion, or even by their basic materialism—prevented them from truly grasping the profound convergence of the world's spiritualities. The occultists or syncretic Theosophists of the nineteenth century had tried, more or less confusedly, to bring out the all-encompassing traits of a universal metaphysic, of a more or less mythical primordial tradition, but their presentations came more from their imagination than from reality.

Beginning with his first work in 1921, Guénon castigated the myopia and thoughtlessness of the Orientalists while pointing out the inanity of the theosophists and spiritists and called for the return to a "true intellectuality." In one of his first articles, he noted, "What is important above all else is precisely the restoration of true intellectuality and with it the sense of doctrine and of



tradition. It is high time to show that religion is something other than a matter of sentimental devotion, something other than mere moral precepts, or the consolations available to souls weakened by suffering, and that one can find in it that 'solid nourishment' of which St. Paul speaks in the Epistle to the Hebrews."<sup>58</sup>

A reader of Guénon from the beginning, Schuon was sensitive to the perfume of Eastern wisdom from a very early age.<sup>59</sup> It is known that his precocious reading of the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* and his seeing Buddhist statues for the first time, for example, had awakened irrepressible resonances in him, which the reading of Guénon would only amplify. However, the real singularity of Schuon, as well as that of Guénon to some extent,<sup>60</sup> lay in his ability to resume the dialectics of the great ancient ones—Plato, Shankara, Eckhart, Ibn 'Arabî. By using, as a pure metaphysician, the genius of Vedantic expression, he not only gives a stunning synthesis of what constitutes the unanimity of metaphysical perspectives, while discerning in them an "esoteric ecumenism" far from occultist confusion or theologico-philosophical<sup>61</sup> pathos, but he also thereby recalls their operative virtues.

Benefitting from the breaking open of worlds until then closed, he knew precisely and with refreshing clarity how to "provide people with keys fashioned afresh—keys no better than the old ones but merely more elaborate—in order to help them to discover the truths written in an eternal script in the very substance of man's spirit."<sup>62</sup>

Schuon clarified traditional facts, dissipated their apparent contradictions, and distilled the essential; he refused to be confined to the "meanders of theology" and considered himself not to be the "believer" of a given religion but a plenary "esoterist": "The sapiential perspective alone is necessarily and integrally esoteric, because it alone reaches beyond all relativities."<sup>63</sup> Criticizing the weaknesses of classical or modern philosophical systems and methodically studying all the theological and exoteric questions, he developed a metaphysical opus which is "direct, rigorous, explicit, and complete."<sup>64</sup> With a perpetual concern for equity, Schuon sought to bring each question back to its proper dimension. For example, he elucidated the most complex concepts, such as those of the Beyond-Being or of *Mâyâ*, the problem of Evil, and the question of intellectual intuition or of the theophanic character of intelligence.

However, "the metaphysical or esoteric doctrine is meant for a different subjectivity than the general religious message: the latter speaks to the will and the passionate man and the former to the intelligence and the contemplative man; the intellectual aspect of exoterism is theology, whereas the emotional aspect of esoterism is the sense of beauty inasmuch as it has an interiorizing virtue."<sup>65</sup>

In fact everything in the attitudes and tastes of Schuon can be explained by an untiring quest for Primordality and Beauty, the Essential and the True. As he wrote to one of his correspondents on March 15, 1983: "One cannot be a metaphysician of consequence without being at the same time a moralist and an aesthete in the deepest sense. This is manifested in all traditional cultures with their

climates of virtue and beauty.” In *Roots of the Human Condition*, he synthesizes his thought in one succinct phrase, “the *Sophia perennis* is to know total Truth and, in consequence, to will the Good and to love Beauty.”<sup>66</sup>

## AN ESOTERIC LINEAGE

Schuon never identified himself exclusively with the teachings of one sole master. He even wrote, in reply to his detractors who questioned his Guénonian filiation, that it was “the least of his worries to be described as so-and-so’s disciple.”<sup>67</sup>

However, concerning the Vedantic ternary, three paternities or spiritual “god parentages” can be recognized as being linked to one of the dimensions of Schuon’s personality. The *Cit* aspect, which we briefly described earlier, can be related to the authority of René Guénon who is, unquestionably, the one who introduced him to metaphysics and who, he stressed, had the “noteworthy merit of presenting and making explicit crucial concepts of pure metaphysical science, of integral tradition and traditional orthodoxy, of symbolism, and of esoterism.”<sup>68</sup> In his first letters to Guénon, in the early thirties, Schuon, who was twenty-one years his junior, addressed him deferentially with the phrase “Very honored and dear Master.” Also, in an exchange with Michel Valsân, he said that he saw in Guénon a “master of doctrine who could have lived several centuries before me.”<sup>69</sup> Several years after the founding of his *ṭarīqah* and as a way of tribute, it was he who first gave Guénon the honorary name of Shaykh,<sup>70</sup> as is commonly done in the East. Even though he was far from sharing all his points of view—and they diverged very clearly at the end of Guénon’s life, particularly on the question of Christianity—Schuon willingly acknowledged his “intellectual genius.”

In turning to the *Sat* aspect of Schuon’s nature, which we previously discussed, it resonates with that of the strong personality of Shaykh Al-‘Alawī, from whom, it should be pointed out, he claimed part of the “spiritual heritage.” By conferring initiation upon him the old Shaykh in fact became his veritable spiritual father, toward whom he was to feel indebted throughout his life. Thus he wrote, in a letter sent from Mostaghanem several days before leaving again for France, “I must now depart from my venerated, beloved Shaykh. I will never forget the touch of his blessed hands”(letter to Lucy von Dechend, October 13, 1933). On several occasions he stressed that Shaykh Al- ‘Alawī’s message of invocation and inwardness was the “providential complement” of the Guénonian message.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, in connection with the *Ânanda* aspect of his nature, it seemed that it was Schuon’s link with Al-Khidr,<sup>72</sup> the “Master of the masterless,” that could shed light on certain facets of his personality and thereby show the exemplary coherence of his spiritual life. In order to throw some light on this rather particular question, and because it is evidently an issue of subtle phenomenology, we

shall draw a parallel between Rûzbihân Bâqlî Shîrâzî's (1128–1209) spiritual personality and Schuon's, for we can trace in the life and spiritual paternity of this great Persian Sunni Sufi many traits and events which strangely ally him to Schuon himself.<sup>73</sup>

Rûzbihân of whom Ibn 'Arabî said that he was "one of the greatest among men of God" and whom Corbin qualified as "prophet of Beauty," left us several written works, the translations of which are just recently becoming known in Europe. His spiritual diary, *Kashf al-asrâr* (The Unveiling of Secrets) is a complex account which retraces his mystical steps and visionary experiences, while *Le Jasmin des Fidèles d'Amour* is a sublime meditation on immanent Beauty and Femininity.<sup>74</sup>

From his childhood onwards, Rûzbihân too bore the traits of a pure pneumatic, totally misunderstood by those around him: "I was born among the ignorant, people who were the prey of recklessness and error, whose behavior was crude and vulgar like that of asses fleeing from a lion."<sup>75</sup> Even at an early age, he wondered about the question of divine presence and started to "seek its *sirr* (secret)," "Later," he continued, "the love of ardent desire ('*ishq*) dawned in my heart and I felt my heart melt in this love. I spent all this time in deep nostalgia, for my heart was then plunged into the ocean of remembrance of my eternal pre-existence and the perfumes of the celestial world."<sup>76</sup>

Rûzbihân's path and spiritual aspirations clearly evoked those of the young Schuon. He was only fifteen years old when an inner voice whispered to Rûzbihân that he was a *nabî*, meaning a prophet, not a legislating one of course, but one nevertheless charged with a mission, a feeling which was not, as we know, unknown to Schuon himself.<sup>77</sup> As Marie-Madeleine Davy quite rightly said about Hildegard of Bingen regarding what a prophet reveals, "It is not the future; it is the absolute. The prophet answers to the nostalgia of knowledge, not the knowledge of tomorrow, but that of God."<sup>78</sup>

One evening as Rûzbihân left his house, wandered off to the desert, and started to do his ablutions, he was approached by a very handsome individual who had, he said, the appearance of a Sufi shaykh. "I was incapable of uttering a word. He himself told me a few words concerning *tawhîd*. I did not understand, but I felt simultaneously great distress and an unbelievable love." Rûzbihân saw this mysterious stranger again on two or three occasions during the next few years, and understood that it was a manifestation of Al-Khidr (*Khezr* in Iranian Islam) and recognized him as his hidden master.<sup>79</sup>

We have already briefly described<sup>80</sup> Schuon's encounter in Mostaghanem and then in Oran in 1933 with an enigmatic person whose attitude and presence undeniably recalled the manifestations of Al-Khidr as described not only by Rûzbihân but also by Ibn 'Arabî and many other Sufis.<sup>81</sup> Several letters of that time give evidence of this, including a letter to René Guénon written on June 5, 1934, just over a year after this encounter. They have the freshness of the

recently experienced impression and they enable us to gather a very precise account of this meeting.

While residing at Shaykh Al-'Alawî's *zâwiyah*, Schuon saw a stranger coming, very tall and of dark complexion, wrapped in a black burnous, and wearing red Saharan cavalier's boots.<sup>82</sup> The stranger joined them at their meal, sitting down in the circle of *fūqarâ*. His face was very solemn and struck him with "its power and its majesty." From his whole being radiated a mysterious, fascinating force. When Schuon started to return to his cell, the stranger got up, stared at him intensely, then kissed his forehead and spoke some words which Schuon, just like Rûzbihân in his time, could not understand.

Quite shaken, he retired to his cell. He felt overwhelmed and experienced an incomprehensible feeling of dissatisfaction filled with remorse. However, as though attracted by an outer force, he went out onto his doorstep and contemplated the plain and the sea extending in the distance. A great desire for purification came over him and he found himself dreaming about the future. At that instant, the stranger came out of the *zâwiyah* and stopped in front of him. The blue-black look in his eyes seemed to transfix him and he suddenly seized Schuon's hand, holding it in the way it is held for the initiation rite, and enjoined him to repeat after him three times in Arabic the Quranic formula, "Lead us on the straight path."<sup>83</sup> Then he added a few words and said in French, "You, I have known you for a long time. Good-bye and thank you." Having said this he went away, walking with a light, energetic tread. Schuon confided to Guénon that this man had made an even stronger impression on him than the old Shaykh himself.<sup>84</sup>

He was to meet him again in Oran a few days later during a common prayer, in a long, low basement which served as a mosque. The stranger, still dressed in black and wearing a dark turban, sat beside him and Schuon kissed his shoulder as is the custom. The man took his hand, and he again felt the flow of an unusual power. His way of reciting the rosary, alternating a loud voice with a soft voice, was uncommon, yet, next to him, Schuon felt "overwhelmed with confidence." Turning to him, the man said, "For he who is alone with God, men no longer count, he has no need of them. He is close to God everywhere, his homeland is nowhere and everywhere."<sup>85</sup>

Quite naturally, Schuon then inquired after his name. The stranger hesitated, smiled, and replied that it was of little importance, but that people would name him Ahmad; then he got up and started to leave. Schuon took him in his arms and kissed his hand and shoulder and the man did the same. As if spell-bound, Schuon had the feeling that "this *zâwiyah* has been built because of the two of us, that it had been waiting just for this evening, and that now it could collapse."

Profoundly moved, he felt a strong desire to see the stranger again and soon the opportunity arose. The very next day, while he was doing his ablutions, he

heard a voice calling him. Looking up, he saw the tall figure of the stranger who smiled at him, greeted him, and then entered the *ẓāwiyah*. Schuon quickly finished his ablutions and, still dripping with water, entered the room in turn. But the room was empty.

Schuon never again encountered this mysterious person, yet their meeting was to influence him deeply, far beyond their brief moments together.

Many years later, he said in a letter to Michel Vâlsan (June 22, 1961), "For theoretical reasons, I was not sensitive enough to the value of the holy men I met [in Mostaghanem] and one day everything might have foundered within me, but then the mysterious Ahmed intervened and saved me with a glance, a gesture, a word."

This leads one to contemplate the significance of being a disciple of Al-Khidr. First, according to Corbin, who has analyzed the phenomenon as it occurs throughout the history of Sufism, the subtle connection to the lineage of Al-Khidr, who is "always experienced simultaneously as a person and an archetype," confers a "transhistorical dimension" to those involved. This brings us back to the notion of *fard*, of those who are "isolated in this world but together in God."<sup>86</sup>

Second, Al-Khidr "shows all those who are his disciples how to be what he himself is: one who has reached the source of Life, the Eternal Adolescent, that is, as Suhrawardî's account (*If you are Kheẓr*) makes clear, he who has reached the *haqīqah*, the esoteric mystical truth which dominates the Law, and emancipates from literal religion."<sup>87</sup>

Finally, Al-Khidr leads all of his disciples to their own theophany, to their own "inner paradise" from which ensues a steadfast certainty and a "total sincerity toward themselves." They thus come to be indifferent to the devotees' blame: "Every saint, Ali Wafâ<sup>88</sup> once said, hears in the voice of a Khidr the projection of the spirit of their own holiness, just as each prophet perceives in the form of an (Angel) Gabriel the spirit of his own prophetic mission, perceivable to his senses, not only to the sensitive soul."

"To become Kheẓr," Corbin concludes, "is to have attained the aptitude to theophanic vision;"<sup>89</sup> we shall add that it is also to have pierced the "mystery of the Veil,"<sup>90</sup> "to see God everywhere" or, to use an expression from the Bhagavad Gītâ, to see "the infinite Joy that fills the finite."

## TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE

Schuon writes, "The perspective of the religion of the Heart or of Love is above all intellectual and thereby universal; its musical dimension pertains, not to an ideological and moral sentimentalism, but to Beauty and Love, which on the one hand remain in God and on the other hand radiate throughout both cosmic and human Manifestation."<sup>91</sup>

The importance given to the sense of Immanence, to the intuition of essences, to the discerning of forms, brings us to the heart of the third aspect of Schuon's personality, to his dimension of '*ashiq*, *fedele d'amore*, disciple of Al-Khidr. This aspect of Schuon, because it is less known and more intimate, is the one which may lead the most to incomprehension or misinterpretation, even to gossip or slander: "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Mathew 8:6).

Henry Corbin, to whom we are most indebted for his knowledge of the tradition of the oriental *fedeli d'amore* of old, was in this respect under no illusions:

Our modern civilization, the metaphysical secularization which has succeeded religious ascetism, the unconscious profanations committed in the name of publicity or sports morals, so-called demythizations or demystifications, have so totally desacralized human beauty that its numinous aspect, found in the *fedele d'amore*, is perhaps what is most strange, or most foreign, to a man of today. Yet it is a phenomenon as basic as the perception of a sound or a color. One does not prove a sound or color. Either one is capable of perceiving beauty as both fascinating and terrifying, arousing joy and desperate nostalgia, attesting to a presence which is not there, and yet by its absence gives us a sign, or one is incapable of this perception. If one is not capable of this perception it would be better then to cease speaking about the religion of the *fedeli d'amore*.<sup>92</sup>

Throughout his works Schuon relentlessly emphasizes the importance of the theophanic vision,<sup>93</sup> of the perception of "metaphysical transparency of phenomena," and advises us "not to forget immanence by dint of accentuating transcendence."<sup>94</sup>

Thus, in a private text, he urges us to "maintain a balance" between transcendence and immanence:

The sense of beauty actualized by visual or auditory perception of the beautiful, or by either static or dynamic bodily expression of beauty, is equivalent to a "remembrance of God" if it is in balance with the "remembrance of God" as such, which requires extinction of the perceptible. To the sensory perception of Beauty must respond the retreat to the suprasensory source of Beauty; the perception of sensory theophany requires unitive interiorization.<sup>95</sup>

If "the world is a fabric of theophanies,"<sup>96</sup> to have a sense of the sacred is being conscious of these theophanies. "Wheresoever ye turn, there is the Face of

God," as the Quran clearly states. "The sacred," adds Schuon, "is the perfume of Divinity, it is the divine made present" and "true devotion is to rest in Being, which is both transcendent and immanent."<sup>97</sup>

These two fundamental notions are expressed in Islamic doctrine by the words *tanẓīh* (abstraction) and *tashbīh* (analogy, resemblance). Although Islam, as such, clearly stresses the first aspect and insists on the discontinuity between God and the world ("No thing is comparable to Him"), it does not forget that "Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth." This allowed Schuon to write, "To metaphysical 'abstraction' corresponds mystical 'solitude,' *khalwah*, the ritual expression of which is the spiritual retreat. 'Resemblance,' for its part, gives rise to the grace of 'radiance,' *jalwah*, of which the ritual expression is the invocation of God, performed in common. Mystery of transcendence or 'contraction' (*qabd*) on the one hand, and mystery of immanence or 'dilatation' (*bast*) on the other; *khalwah* withdraws us from the world, *jalwah* transforms it into a sanctuary."<sup>98</sup> He then adds in a note, "*Jalwah* is the concrete awareness of the Divine omnipresence, an awareness which makes it possible to understand the 'language of the birds,' metaphysically speaking, and to hear the universal praise that rises to God." Drawing a parallel between Transcendence and "Fear," Immanence and "Love," Schuon wrote elsewhere that Immanence "is the 'dilating' and 'elating' return of the accident to the Substance, or of the drop to the Sea."<sup>99</sup> Insisting on the *tashbīh* and thus on the importance of contemplation in all forms, Schuon ranks amongst the Neoplatonist line of the greatest Sufi masters, such as Ibn 'Arabī in the *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq*,<sup>100</sup> Ahmad Ghazālī, Ayn al-Ghodāt Hamadāni, Eraqī, Attar, Hāfiz, Rūmī, and the astonishing Rūzbihān. Like Plotinus, who assures us that "every soul is and becomes that which it beholds," all these enlightened souls seem to be endowed with an "attention that is perpetually turned toward the Divine."<sup>101</sup> They all call for a conversion of our attention, for a "metamorphosis of vision."

"To have the presentiment of the essence in things: this is the basis of the Hindu *darshan*, the visual assimilation of celestial qualities," wrote Schuon in *To Have a Center*.<sup>102</sup> In his own life, Schuon also conveyed the feeling of perpetual practice of the Presence of God, combined with discriminating intelligence and contemplation, intellective sobriety and mystical drunkenness, *tanẓīh* and *tashbīh*.<sup>103</sup> This is a balanced attitude since "discernment, through its adamantine rigor, refers as it were to the mystery of the Absolute" and "analogously contemplation, through its aspect of musical gentleness, pertains to the mystery of the Infinite."<sup>104</sup>

It is evident that the principal polarity is equally manifested in the human form. "A priori, virility refers to the Principle, and femininity to Manifestation; but in an altogether different respect, that of complementarity in *divinis*, the masculine body expresses Transcendence, and the feminine body, Immanence; the latter being nearer to Love and the former to Knowledge."<sup>105</sup> Schuon emphasizes

elsewhere that “the synthesis of all created beauty is man (*homo* = *vir* and *femina*); he is the direct or central manifestation of the *tashbih* and that is why he is ‘made in God’s image’ and he is the ‘vicar of God on earth.’”<sup>106</sup>

The archetypal theophany is human beauty, more naturally embodied by woman, and this beauty is consequently invested with a sacred sense. “Woman,” said Rûmî, who was a great *fedele d’amore*,<sup>107</sup> “is the most beautiful manifestation of the Divine,” while Ibn ‘Arabî went further by saying, “The contemplation of God in women is the most intense and the most perfect.”<sup>108</sup>

It was also in his quality of *fedele d’amore* that Schuon wrote, “The feminine body is far too perfect and spiritually too eloquent to be no more than a kind of transitory accident.”<sup>109</sup> He continued, “Physical beauty is sacred because it manifests the divine Intention for that body.” This is why “seen thus, feminine beauty appears as an initiatic wine in the face of the rationality represented in certain respects by the masculine body.”<sup>110</sup> All this would not have been disavowed by Rûzbihân, who “devoted himself to understanding the secret of the human form with the eyes of intelligence” and for whom “contemplation of human beauty is the *qiblah* of the *fedeli d’amore* because “it is through human beauty that love enters this world.”<sup>111</sup> Hereby we accede to a universal esoteric tradition which, in Islam, is written in the Quran’s own words: “We have created the human being in the most beautiful of statures” (LXXXV, 4) and “O! how beautiful is your form . . .” (XL, 66, LXIV, 3). The Prophet adds, “God created Adam as the image of His own form.”

“The whole secret of the *fedeli d’amore*,” Corbin noted, “is this: one must neither turn away from human beauty, nor turn toward it. Keep one’s gaze straight, without deviating or exceeding.”<sup>112</sup>

In one of his later and highly synthetic articles, Schuon did in fact mention that “the contemplation of the naked Lady, in certain Troubadour or *fedeli d’amore* circles, suggests a vision of Infinity and of pure Being, not a seduction but a *catharsis*.”<sup>113</sup> And he made clear in a private text:

Given the spiritual degeneration of humanity, the highest possible degree of beauty, which is that of the human body, could not play a part in ordinary piety; however this theophany may be a support in esoteric spirituality, and this is shown in the sacred art of Hindus and Buddhists. Nakedness signifies inwardness, essentiality, primordality, and consequently universality; clothing signifies social function, and also, in this context, sacerdotal function. Nakedness signifies glory, the radiation of a substance or spiritual energy; the body is the form of the essence and thus the essence of form.<sup>114</sup>

Similarly, Rûzbihân evoked, in his *Jasmin*, a “session of intimacy” with the beloved of tender beauty, in which, beyond all concupiscence, he had only one



desire: to contemplate the beautiful smiling face of the beloved while listening to poetry. This recalls the tantric “circle of ravishment”<sup>115</sup> except that here it is not so much a question of a “mystical sublimation of desire or the conversion of an energy of sexual origin, but of the gnostic conversion of one’s vision,”<sup>116</sup> for the sensory form of beauty is the “Epiphanic mirror” of Truth, the “splendor of the True.” In the same way, Schuon drew our attention to the efficiency of “invocational interiorization of aesthetic or erotic emotion, the support being either in surrounding nature, a sanctuary, a creature, a dance or a poem; manifestation of the divine *Rahmah*”<sup>117</sup> also leads to its essence, an essence immanent in our hearts. In other words realization, through *dhikr*, of the immanent *Rahmah*, or the interiorizing intuition of the *Rahmah* together with one of its manifestations is a sort of ‘Platonic remembrance,’ which from a phenomenal exterior leads us to the divine Inward.”<sup>118</sup>

A chaste attitude and metamorphosis of vision mean that “we cannot reach you through evil intent,” as Rûzbihân again said, echoing the ineffable ‘Umar Khayyam: “May your ass’s tongue be damned, O severe censor, who interrupts me at such a moment. More than you, I have put my confidence in God. He will pardon me for He is the Clement, the Merciful! He is Beautiful. He has created Beauty. Can he blame me for adoring Beauty? After all, why would he have made our eyes, if he forbade us to use them!”<sup>119</sup>

Henry Corbin said the same thing. Recalling the *hadîth*, which says, “God is Beautiful and He loves Beauty” he declared in no uncertain terms: “[T]his is why the reproach made by ascetism against the mystics of love seems to me particularly inoperative. Being completely closed to this feeling and to this symbolism, it does no better than to accuse them of aestheticism. The pious outrages formulated by hostility or cowardice against the fragility of these theophanies just prove one thing: how foreign we are to the sacral sentiment of perceptible Beauty.”<sup>120</sup>

“All creation is a theophany,” Corbin pointed out, “but this theophany cannot be perceived except by one whose vision is the vision of God contemplating Himself in His own vision.” This approach rejoins that of Schuon and stresses, with regard to the interiorizing and essentializing virtue of Beauty, its “double-edged, sword-like nature, depending on the spectator or listener’s capacity or disposition. Beauty is both *Atmâ* and *Mâyâ*; the contemplative grasps *Atmâ* in *Mâyâ*; and not just *Mâyâ*.”<sup>121</sup>

## THE MOTHER OF ALL PROPHETS

Schuon writes:

The Blessed Virgin is inseparable from the incarnated Word, as the Lotus is inseparable from the Buddha, and as the Heart is the predes-

tined seat of immanent wisdom. In Buddhism there is an entire mysticism of the Lotus, which communicates a celestial image of an unsurpassable beauty and eloquence; a beauty analogous to the monstrosity containing the real presence, and analogous above all to that incarnation of Divine Femininity that is the Virgin Mary. The Virgin, *Rosa Mystica*, is like the personification of the celestial Lotus; in a certain respect, she personifies the sense of the sacred, which is the indispensable introduction to the reception of the Sacrament.<sup>122</sup>

Since his Christian adolescence, Schuon had always remained deeply attached to the Virgin Mary, who in his eyes incarnated “global and undifferentiated virtue, the soul identified with love of God, with contemplativity,” yet it was especially from 1965 that he would often refer to the one who Lorette’s litany said was *Sedes Sapientiae*, the “Throne of Knowledge.”

We have already briefly recounted<sup>123</sup> how Schuon, that year, had experienced the Marial grace while going to Morocco by boat:

It is not I who have chosen the Virgin, it is she who has chosen me. A few years ago, I was in my *zâwiyah* invoking the two names of Mercy;<sup>124</sup> at the same time I felt something totally unexpected invade my whole being, and it was the beatific Presence of Seyyidatnâ Maryam . . . From this blessed moment on, I advised the recitation of both Names, but I did not attach further importance to this event. Later, while travelling to Morocco, she saved me from deepest distress; I even thought I was to die. The miracle happened on the boat half way along the journey, then at Tetouan and again at Fez, like reverberations. Yet, I had never thought of the Holy Virgin when she interceded out at sea; *Stella Maris*! (letter to Martin Lings, March 23, 1967)

Curiously, the year 1965 was at the very center of his spiritual life, equally between his entering Islam in 1932—date of his “spiritual rebirth”—and his death in 1998.

A symbolic number for a man whose traditional name was ‘Îsâ (Jesus), thirty-three years stretch on either side of this date. Without systemizing or drawing hasty conclusions, 1965 was thus evidently for him a pivotal date which schematically marked a point of balance in the expression of his own spiritual life: “the dry way” for the first 33 years, which were more marked by the sign of Masculinity, affirmation of transcendent and absolute Truth; “the moist way” for the next 33 years, henceforth placed under the Marial sign and dominated as it were by Femininity, affirmation of immanent and infinite Beauty.<sup>125</sup>

A new fecundity, a new dimension, and a new fulfilment were to be found significantly from then on in his writings, as from *Light on the Ancient Worlds* and

especially *Logic and Transcendence*, a book that he always considered as one of his main treatises.

Shortly before, in January 1965, Schuon had published an article entitled “*Religio perennis*”<sup>126</sup> in which he explained for the first time his approach to the “invisible” or “underlying religion”<sup>127</sup> present everywhere, founded on the one hand on discernment between the Real and the illusory, since “the Real has entered the illusory” and on the other hand on permanent and unitive concentration on the Real, in order that “the illusory may re-enter the Real.” This is a double movement of Knowledge and Love from the one Real which brings us back to the “mystery of the Veil”: “In understanding religion, not only in a particular form or according to some verbal specification, but also in its formless essence, we understand all religions, that is to say, the meaning of their plurality and their diversity; this is the plane of gnosis, of the *religio perennis*, whereby the extrinsic antinomies of dogma are explained and resolved.”<sup>128</sup> Now, in the letter of 1967 quoted above, Schuon made clear that to him “Seyyidatnâ Maryam is the personification, rooted in the Names *Rahmân* and *Rahîm*”<sup>129</sup> and in the *Basmalah*, of the *Religio perennis*.”

“The *Religio perennis* is also the *Religio cordis*, the “Religion of the heart”; the path of intellection and interiority; of interiority dear to Seyyidnâ ‘Îsâ (Jesus),” he said elsewhere in a text which resumes his entire perspective.<sup>130</sup>

Since she is a link between Christianity and Islam and also because, “chosen above all the women of the Universe,” according to the sacred Islamic text, she is “Mother of all the Prophets,” the message of Mary—an unarticulated and by definition non legislating message—is in itself the Logos (symbolized by the Christ Child), the *Fitrah* (the original Norm), the primordial and eternal Wisdom.

This message being informal, it is above all an appeal to pure holiness, which coincides with essential and primordial Truth. Receptive Purity and saving Grace is indeed unified in Mary, *Mater Dei*. Did Rûzbihân not also say that “the substance of Maryam is the substance of original holiness”?<sup>131</sup>

Finally, because Sayyidatnâ Maryam, the feminine aspect of the Logos, is an archetypal personification of *Faqr* (poverty of the spirit), of submission to God, of perpetual remembrance (*Dhikr*), and of the *Khalwah* (spiritual retreat, but also interiorization), her intimate relationship with the Schuon perspective is self-evident.

And this is why, with reference to this highly symbolic spiritual patronage, Schuon henceforth gave his brotherhood the name *Tarîqah Maryamiyyah*.



In a century that has seen the industrialization of horror and doubt, in an age when human beings are often no more than “chaos of hazards,” in a time when faith hesitates between liberal roaming and fundamentalist autism, when religion

is too often diluted in an acephalous sentimentalism and becomes superstition in the sense that this is “what remains when all is forgotten,” Schuon knew how to make us hear the voice of eternal Wisdom, to contribute to the restoration of “true intellectuality”—as Guénon vowed—and to show that beyond the divergences of religious forms the Truth is one and universal. Yet he could not have delivered this message of Knowledge and Inwardness with such force had he not been, while essentially pneumatic, a true *‘āshiq*, an authentic *fedele d’amore*, and perhaps we should say of him as he did of the Prophet of Islam “His Message testifies to the Transcendent, whereas his personality—his *barakah*—manifests as it were a ‘krishnaïtic’ participation in the Immanent.”<sup>132</sup>



## CHAPTER THREE

### Esoterism and Tradition

*In esoterism there are two principles which may be actualized sporadically and at different levels, but always in a partial and contained manner: the first is that fundamentally, there is only one religion with various forms, for humanity is one and the spirit is one; the second principle is that man bears everything within himself, potentially at least, by reason of the immanence of the one Truth.*

—Frithjof Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*

The definition and scope of esoterism remains an ambiguous and disputed matter, as is clearly apparent from a variety of reactions to Frithjof Schuon's presentation of the concept of *religio perennis*. In one of his later books, Schuon indicates his preference for this term on the basis of its operative implications, while considering himself as a spokesman of the *sophia perennis*, thereby allowing us to label him a "perennialist" author, that is, one who claims the universality and primordially of fundamental metaphysical principles and the perennity of the wisdom that actualizes these principles in man, as expressed in all great revelations and major teachings of sages and saints throughout the ages. In that sense, perennialism implies the emphases on both tradition as repository of the sacred, and esoterism as inner content of all religions. It can be argued that the latter occupies the most central position in Schuon's thought. Actually, there appears to be little doubt that the question of esoterism should lie at the center of any objective and consistent interpretation of Schuon's writings. It is true that some critics have tended to introduce the works of Schuon in terms of an emphasis on tradition, a tendency that is parallel to placing Schuon in the strict lineage of Guénon, Coomaraswamy, and other traditionalist authors.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of these interpretations, there is no doubt that Frithjof Schuon can be characterized as a traditionalist insofar as tradition, far from being simply defined by

customs or conventions, constitutes for him the horizontal continuation of revelation and therefore bears the imprint of the sacred.<sup>2</sup> The origin of tradition is not simply human; like the *ashvattha* tree of the Baghavad Gîtâ (XV, 1), tradition is a tree that has its roots in Heaven. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes in his introduction to his edition of the *Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, tradition is "all that has its origin in Heaven, in revelation in its most universal sense, along with its unfolding in a particular spatio-temporal setting determined by the Source from which the tradition originates. It applies not only to this truth of celestial origin, but to the applications of the principles contained therein to realms as disparate as law and art, as methods of meditation and the manner of cultivating a garden."<sup>3</sup> Insofar as Schuon understands tradition as being the semidivine and semihuman reality that provides mankind with a general climate conducive to the consciousness of the Absolute and the integration of all its dimensions in this remembrance, thereby fulfilling its highest vocation in view of its eschatological ends, one may define Schuon as a traditionalist without the least reservation.

## ESOTERISM AND TRADITION

However, an exclusive or excessive emphasis on the traditional dimension of Schuon's teachings may tend to blur the fundamental specificity of his perspective within the so-called perennialist school while, more importantly, eroding the core substance of his work and perspective. While it is true that, for Schuon, tradition may indeed be understood as the best possible approximation on the terrestrial level of a conformity to Reality, in the sense that it guarantees horizontal equilibrium and provides the necessary means for vertical ascension within the strictures of fallen mankind, it would actually be more accurate to define it as a lesser evil than as an unmixed and sublime good. Schuon is certainly not a traditionalist if being a traditionalist amounts to giving a seal of qualitative excellence and penetrating intelligence to all the phenomena that tradition carries in its wake. There is a certain margin of unintelligence, bias, and even occasional lack of beauty in tradition. Schuon does not claim, for example, that all traditional sciences are necessarily more adequate to physical reality than modern sciences. For instance, he acknowledges the lack of critical sense and the speculative excesses of some traditional cosmological sciences. This acknowledgement is not only a theoretical matter: it bears important and concrete consequences for the ways in which tradition may be introduced to a modern audience. The modern ignorance of metaphysical realities and lack of an integral understanding of the levels of Reality should not blind traditionalists to the relative truths and positive achievements of some modern sciences and their applications. Similarly, while stating with an uncompromising clarity the objective principles of sacred and traditional art, Schuon does not hesitate to mention

their pitfalls or their failures, particularly with respect to a certain lack of imagination. Distancing himself from those who would quasi-reflexologically equate the beautiful and the traditional, Schuon points to the unevenness of traditional aesthetic realizations as well as, conversely, to the undeniable archetypal beauty of some instances of nontraditional art. This is not to belittle nor call into question the overall truth and necessity of tradition, but simply to prevent a de facto idealization and absolutization of its forms, which might obstruct the objective perception of reality and make us miss the moon out of a devout but short-sighted fascination with the finger pointing at it. More generally, it is a concrete application of esoterism as science of the nature of things or discipline of objectivity. Objectivity is in fact intrinsically connected with totality, and partiality or biases always result from a failure to be fully objective, whether this failure be accidental or substantial, innocent or involving the responsibility of the subject.<sup>4</sup>

Schuon's concept of "human margin" is obviously pertinent in this respect, but it is worth recalling that Schuon gives to this expression two very different meanings. One of them refers to a strictly human reality, whereas the second points to a prefiguration of human divergences and crystallizations already on the Divine plane. The human margin refers most generally and most directly to the realm of the human interpretations and formalizations of divine inspiration. In this domain, which is the field upon which many theological crystallizations and outer prescriptions flourish, the human mind and sensibility tend to overemphasize and overspecify what, in the purely divine flux of revelation, implies a certain level of indeterminacy. In other words, the one-sidedness of externalized reason—its rigid inability to envisage a plurality of points of view—and the pressure of collective sentimentalities that are in need of simplifications and emotional intensifications cannot do justice to what could be called, in Schuon's terms, the "internal infinitude" of the message. This human side of tradition is however not the only veiling of the Light, even though it is probably the only one that many traditionalists would be ready to acknowledge, if only begrudgingly and theoretically. There is also a relativity of religious claims that can be traced back to the relatively absolute character of the Divine Subject as interlocutor of a given sector of mankind. The theomorphism of man calls for an anthropomorphism of God, in the sense that God assumes a particular Face in order to speak to man. It is as if God were so to speak taking sides when he engages his Word in the terrestrial contingencies of human history. One can here again distinguish two levels: on the highest plan, God's partiality is connected to the *idée-force* of a given religion; this is the inclusive aspect of the matter, in the sense that this *idée-force* is not in itself incompatible with other standpoints. In fact, the concept of *idée-force* is quite eloquent and suggestive in Schuon's French lexicon. It refers to the dynamic power of the idea instead of solely indicating its epistemological adequacy. In Islam, the *idée-force* will be that of the Divine Unity, in Christianity that of the Divine Incarnation. But on a lower or more



extrinsic level, this *idée-force* determines a certain exclusivity or opposition vis-à-vis other creeds. The typical example is that of Islam's negation of the death of Christ, a negation that is demanded by its particular emphasis on Unity and its rejection of all the elements of the Christian mythology that would alter or compromise this sense of Unity by highlighting the divinity of Christ. On this level, truth is no longer a pure matter of objective reality, it is also a matter of spiritual economy and "divine strategy," to use one of Schuon's phrases. Now the perception and distinction of these various levels of confessional subjectivism, from the Divine to the human, presupposes an intellective standpoint that is in a very real sense independent from the traditional and even the religious point of view. For Schuon, a true esoterist never takes sides in intertraditional polemics on the basis of confessional sentiments or mental and cultural habits.

### DEFINING ESOTERISM

The objection that is readily raised against this intellective perspective consists in labeling it an inordinate aggrandizement of man: human intelligence usurps God's centrality in claiming the privilege of divine omniscience. Schuon's answer to this objection lies in the recognition of the "naturally supernatural" character of the Intellect: man qua man has no access to the Divine mysteries, but the substance of his intelligence allows him to transcend his individual and collective subjectivity as well as the plane upon which the Divine is relativized by virtue of its rapport with man. This is the Advaitin doctrine of *Atman*, and the Eckhartian doctrine of the *increated et increabile intellectus*.

From a more extrinsic standpoint, some may dispute the opportuneness of the expression of such insights in the Divine relativity, given the concrete need for a solid traditional framework, and given the fact that tradition must be more than ever protected against any relativization that would blunt its effectiveness. In a sense, such concerns can find supportive elements in some of Schuon's writings. There is no doubt, for example, that Schuon acknowledges the possibility of a providential sacrifice of some practically secondary truths to a more essential truth.<sup>5</sup> There are contexts, even in spiritual circles, in which some esoteric truths may become practically secondary when considered from the standpoint of the essential end of the path, that is, sanctification. However, even though he may acknowledge the need for such expedient sacrifices on the level of collective religion, Schuon's esoteric point of view is in a sense the opposite of such concerns for protective and cautious expediency. First of all, "there is no right superior to that of Truth," and a perspective that relies on the Intellect should not be primarily dependent upon the functional aspect of truth, but rather on its direct dimension. Second, as Schuon has suggested with much relevance, opportuneness has nothing absolute about it, and it may be that what is inopportune

in a given quarter is quite opportune in another. As Schuon puts it, "[W]e live in an age of confusion and thirst in which the advantages of communication are greater than those of secrecy."<sup>6</sup> This was also, incidentally, the reason why old sages like Hehaka Sapa (Black Elk) thought it profitable, and even necessary, to reveal the secret spiritual knowledge of the Sioux. For them, as Joseph Epes Brown has indicated, Truth always defends itself against profanation anyway, and it may be that its outer manifestation will allow it reach a few qualified souls. The highest implications of esoterism actually entail extrinsic dangers when manifested in a homogeneous traditional context, which is one of the reasons why they rarely appear in their full light in such contexts. However, in the modern world, which is deprived of a center and of religious homogeneity, the extrinsic risks of the intellective and integral perspective are more than often outweighed by its advantages. Given that esoterism is primarily addressed to what may be called an intellectual and spiritual elite (although Schuon is far from sharing Guénon's point of view as to the nature and function of this elite),<sup>7</sup> its opportuneness lies in its freedom from the confessional biases and limitations that tend to keep a number of qualified seekers away from a sacred perspective. This is all the more true in that a real understanding of the relativity of the religious system in Schuon's perspective goes hand in hand with an awareness of its absoluteness as Divine message. A careful reader of Schuon cannot miss the latter any more than he can ignore the former. When one associates Schuon's thought with some informal and nontraditional currents of the so-called New Age movement, one inadvertently or deliberately bypasses the traditional and orthodox emphasis of his intellectual message.

The subtlety of Schuon's perspective, as testified eminently by the seemingly contradictory relationship between the supraformal and traditional bents of his thought, may be deemed a direct manifestation of the metaphysical and spiritual interplay that is at the core of his doctrine, an interplay that is symbolized by the Far-Eastern yin/yang to which Schuon likes to refer so often. Actually, the very expression of metaphysical truths implies a sort of reciprocal immanence of words into silence and silent mystery into words. While there are words that lie in silence, so to speak, as in the Buddha's sermon of the flower, and in Ramana Maharshi's action of presence, there is also, a silence that lies in words and concepts, following Chuang-tze's principle, quoted by Schuon, according to which "one who knows ten must tell nine only." This principle may allow us to better understand why, in such subtle matters as quintessential esoterism, one may emphasize, for a variety of reasons, some aspects of the message at the expense of others. As Schuon himself has made clear, a doctrinal exposition is partly systematic and partly indeterminate, the latter aspect allowing for a plurality of perspectives with regard to its meaning.<sup>8</sup> In fact, esoteric authorities will always contradict themselves in the sense that they will speak a different language depending upon their interlocutor; they may also express different points of view

on the basis of a variety of inspirations pertaining to the diversity of divine aspects or archetypes.<sup>9</sup> As it appears upon reading some of his unpublished writings, Schuon was perfectly aware of, and quite agreeable to, the spectrum of legitimate understandings and interpretations to which his essential message might give rise, while being no less explicit about the scope of what he personally considered to be his integral perspective, which is none other than the expression of his spiritual personality.

A first important aspect of the issue at hand lies in the fact that esoterism may be defined either in its doctrinal aspect or in its methodical dimension, the former concerning Truth as it is perceived by intelligence, while the latter deals with the Way as it is lived by the soul and the will.<sup>10</sup> In its most direct doctrinal expression, esoterism amounts to a fundamental discernment between the absolute and infinite Reality on the one hand, and relative realities on the other. Considered in its absoluteness, Reality is identified as Beyond-Being, as that which lies beyond all determinations and relations—and has therefore no relationship with Creation as such. By contrast, when considered in its dimension of infinitude, Reality is the All-Possibility and as such the Principle that makes possible all further determinations and manifestations. There is only one Reality, which means that Reality alone is, and that, consequently, all realities are only by virtue of their participation in Reality: these are the two faces—exclusive and inclusive—of Truth. This is esoterism when it is reduced to its essential doctrine, which is none other than the universal doctrine of Unity—*at-tawhîdu wâhidun* the doctrine of Unity is one—and which all wisdoms and all religions express in a more or less direct way within the sacred means and constraints of their formal languages.<sup>11</sup>

The notion of Beyond-Being (*Sur-Etre*)<sup>12</sup> is closely connected, in the esoteric perspective, to that of *Mâyâ*. The latter can be defined as Universal Relativity, which means that it ranges from God as Creator at its summit—insofar as he is relative to his Creation and therefore only relatively absolute—to the least of corporeal manifestations. Moreover, these two key concepts, unknown or rejected by exoterism, presuppose the at once epistemological and ontological reality of the Intellect, for only the suprapersonal Intellect transcends the relationship between God and man since it is essentially identified with the Divine Subject itself, *Atman*.

Operatively or methodically, esoterism is defined by Schuon as the most inclusive or integral concentration on the most exclusive Reality: “the Unicity of the Object demands the totality of the subject.” The modes of this concentration, which are at once interiorizing and assimilating, may vary in their sacramental or technical components, but they all amount to an awakening and a deepening of the consciousness or the remembrance of Reality—through meditation, contemplation, invocation, and orison.

Given the essentiality of esoterism, the question must be raised, is esoterism independent from the religion within which it manifests itself? To this question, a totally logical and consistent reader of Schuon's writings can only answer with a proximate "no" upon which an indisputable "yes" must however ultimately prevail.

## ESOTERISM AND EXOTERISM

From one point of view, it is undeniable that the esoteric and gnostic perspective outlined by Schuon defines Revelation, Religion, and Tradition as necessary components of the spiritual path in at least two senses: first, as objective supernatural elements and as such occasional means of awakening of the subjective supernatural element, the Intellect; and second, providing sacred symbols, rites, and other God-given spiritual guarantees and protections, or means of salvation and deliverance. As far as the first aspect is concerned, the need for an *upāya*—a saving "mirage"—or the formal framework of a tradition is however accidental and not essential, which means that the Intellect, and the *Sanātana Dharma* or *religio perennis* as language of the Intellect, is independent of any extrinsic objections<sup>13</sup> arising from the traditional world. It also means, with respect to the operative dimension, that the esoteric understanding of sacred symbols and the concomitant practice of rites may, in some cases, involve a reduction of the latter to their essential components<sup>14</sup>—which are, as such, the most direct methodical vehicles of the *religio perennis*—and to their quintessential sacramental core, the definition of this quintessence depending upon specific circumstances and contexts. In other words, the Law is sacred and cannot lightly be dispensed with in the name of esoterism, but the genuinely esoteric outlook necessarily implies an understanding and a practice of the exoteric system that may—and even must—reduce its formal complexity to a measure of essential simplicity. This principle prompted a traditionalist esoterist such as Titus Burckhardt to write that a true master "surely will . . . reduce traditional form to its essential elements."<sup>15</sup> In doing so, esoterism does not start from the literality of the formal Law to adapt its outlook to it,<sup>16</sup> but rather unfolds from an understanding of the nature of things and the essential finality of the Law in order to live the Law both as a protective framework and as a support for contemplation.

A few words need to be said, in this connection, about the situation of Islam, as a particular spiritual perspective, vis-à-vis esoterism and the *religio perennis*. It is important at the outset to note that any particular religion embodies, in a certain respect, the *religio perennis* as such. As Schuon, and others in his wake, has put it, to live a particular religion is to live Religion as such, and by way of consequence, all religions. Christianity, for example, embodies the *religio*

*perennis* inasmuch as it emphasizes the dimension of essentiality and spiritual inwardness. In this sense, it could even be said that Christianity is identified to the archetype of esoterism, at least methodically speaking. As for Native American Religions, they may be identified to the *religio perennis* through their metaphysics of nature (the primordial and universal Book par excellence) and by the fact that they highlight the prophetic nature of each man as pontifex. Even religions that could *prima facie* be deemed to be less universal, like Judaism, are in their own right manifestations of the *religio perennis*. The elect people symbolizes mankind, it emphasizes the aspect of people of God that each traditional and sacred ethnic or tribal collectivity assumes symbolically in relation to the Divine. In this respect, the communitarian subjectivity of the elect people is like the collective equivalent of the empirical unicity of each person as prophet.<sup>17</sup> The case of Israel is like a supernatural and archetypal manifestation par excellence of this reality. Now, the relationship of Islam to the *religio perennis* is also predicated on some specific emphases and characters of its religious language. These are primarily the emphasis on Divine Unity and in the *a priori* intellective recognition of this Unity, and the primordial aspect of restoration of the *fitrah* or original norm. The terminal and restorative aspect of Islam bears witness to its identification to Religion as such. Apart from other more contingent features that are all more or less traceable to these fundamentals, Islam constitutes, in its essence, a well-suited channel for the manifestation of the *religio perennis* in our day and time. However, it must be quite clear that Schuon does not perceive Islam as the final religious form that would unite and synthesize all other forms, and would therefore function as the spiritual arch of mankind. His spiritual affiliation with this particular religion, far from being the sign of a rallying to some kind of spiritual pan-Islamism, is simply the fact of a particular destiny—for him as for a minority of Westerners—and it must be primarily understood as instrumental or methodical—that is, as giving access to initiatic and spiritual means of grace through Sufism, and by no means confessional and cultural, nor sentimental. Schuon considers Islam with the same objectivity—one would even be tempted to say with more objectivity—than he views other religious languages.

In this connection, an examination of the relationship between esoterism and Islam in Schuon's writings will provide us with a particularly relevant avenue for understanding what is meant by "quintessential esoterism." It could be said that through his most important distinction between "esoteric Islam" and "Islamic esoterism," Schuon refers to the distinction between a spiritual perspective that envisages esoterism from the point of view of Islam and one that envisages Islam from the point of view of esoterism. This is far from being a mere academic subtlety or hair splitting. In fact, it could be argued that most of the hermeneutic divergences to which Schuon's work has given rise stem from this very distinction. In other words, one may be interested in esoterism because of Islam, as one may be interested in Islam because of esoterism. Denying that such

a difference in outlook must have some important consequences on the doctrinal level as well as on the spiritual plane amounts to missing one of the main points of Schuon's quintessential esoterism. For instance, it is clear that this distinction runs parallel to a difference of perspective in terms of understanding the function and priority of esoterism.

An interest in esoterism from the standpoint of Islam, and for the sake of Islam—or a kind of confirmation or validation of Islam by esoterism, if one wishes—will almost unavoidably entail an emphasis on the revivification and expansion of Islam by means of esoteric truths. The outward-leaning, public, and apostolic tendencies of this perspective are not just coincidences: they stem from the very understanding of esoterism and its mission. On the other hand, the perspective of quintessential esoterism will be characterized by an understanding of Islam as an extrinsic support for esoterism, and its overall priority will be more conservative than expansive. This is so to speak and *mutatis mutandis* the distinction that may be drawn between the Christian and Islamic preaching to all nations and the Hindu emphasis on the integral conservation of the *Sanâtana Dharma*. Another major consequence of this divergence lies in the extent to which esoterism may be allowed to manifest itself in the full range of its possibilities. In the perspective of esoterism as a confirmation of Islam, the former will remain always more or less hidden, partial, and implicit. It will be the responsibility of individual seekers, if they are able to break the husk and if they are allowed to do so by a confessional ambience that is not likely to be conducive to such a breaking, to look for the *haqîqah*—the esoteric core—hidden in the form. On the contrary, the perspective of quintessential esoterism will allow, in principle, for the fullest or maximal manifestation of the nature of things in doctrinal and methodical matters. Its reference point will be things as they are rather than things as they are providentially envisaged by Islam. This difference stems from the fact that integral esoterism will tend to consider Islam as a validation of the truth, rather than considering itself as a validation of Islam. When esoterism is primarily envisaged as a validation of Islam, some of its aspects are cast aside or looked upon with suspicion or unease, precisely because they do not necessarily fit the mold of the Islamic *upâya* or other traditional frames of mind. By contrast, quintessential esoterism will not consider the whole religious system of Islam as compatible with its perspective, which is why it will focus on the central and essential elements of its spiritual perspective, those which may provide a direct entrance into the *haqîqah*. On the one hand, esoterism will exclude the ethnic and confessional limitations of Islam; on the other it will understand its central tenets and practices from the point of view of universal gnosis. Schuon has illustrated this point in an unpublished text: reciting a prayer like the *Fâtiḥah* (the opening chapter of the Quran) will not be conceived and lived as the fulfillment of an Islamic duty, it will rather be envisaged as a direct expression of the relationship between man and God.<sup>18</sup> This amounts to saying that quintessential

esoterism will never consider Islam independently from the nature of things and from the integral structure of reality. By contrast, it could be said that esoteric Islam will never allow itself to consider esoterism independently from Islam. On a spiritual level, esoteric Islam therefore considers the realm of canonical prayers and even complex devotions as an absolute imperative, whereas pure esoterism focuses on quintessential prayer, that is, jaculatory prayer. Schuon has highlighted this difference by showing how the former attitude stems from a concentration on the Divine Will whereas the latter is in consonance with the Divine Nature.<sup>19</sup> Finally, a major concomitance of the contrast of what has just been sketched lies in the fact that whereas integral esoterism is always comfortable with recognizing the legitimacy of more exoteric and formalistic perspectives, partial esoterism experiences a tension between its call to universality and its sentimental solidarity with Islam. This tension will more often than not result in anathemas against all intellectual and existential manifestations of esoterism that appear to lie outside the strict and conventional cadre of the Islamic tradition, or at least outside its recorded and accepted historical manifestations.

In this connection, some traditionalist commentators have made much of the alleged dangers of esoterism by emphasizing all the possibilities of deviation that are entailed by the manifestations of quintessential esoterism. In this view of things, tradition appears *a contrario* as a kind of mighty stronghold that would protect seekers against all forms of seductive allures lurking in all corners of the spiritual path.<sup>20</sup> What needs to be understood in this context is that the possibility of misunderstanding and abusing quintessential esoterism lies in its very nature, which is, according to Schuon, extrinsically precarious.<sup>21</sup> This precariousness stems precisely from the subtlety of the esoteric outlook, particularly with respect to the relationship between form and essence: the form *is* and *is not* the essence. The form prolongs the essence but it may also veil it. The essence transcends the form but it also manifests itself through it. In any case, the possibility of abuses or misunderstandings does not invalidate the reality, legitimacy and necessity of esoterism, any more than the abuses of literal formalism and fanaticism invalidate religion as a sacred way. Subjective and expedient reactions to real or imaginary abuses have no bearing upon the objective reality of gnosis and its intrinsic independence from formal religion. To claim that quintessential esoterism is a dangerous perspective because its principles and manifestations lie outside the ordinary scope of the human context of its manifestation is either a truism, in the absence of the required qualifications, or amounts to denying the very possibility of the manifestation of the Spirit since “the Light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not.”<sup>22</sup>

With respect to the relationship between esoterism and exoterism, Schuon has repeatedly asserted that it can and must be viewed from two standpoints: that of continuity, following which esoterism appears as the inner core of a tradition, and that of discontinuity, according to which esoterism transcends exoterism and

may even stand in opposition to it: "If you would have the kernel, you must break the husk,"<sup>23</sup> according to Meister Eckhart's formula often quoted by Schuon. Exoterism as a formal system is a practically necessary framework for the manifestation of esoterism, which befalls upon the former as the mistletoe on an oak,<sup>24</sup> or as the rain falling from the sky to the earth, and the wind which "bloweth where it listeth,"<sup>25</sup> but exoterism, to the extent that it emphasizes a voluntaristic and individualistic piety and its emotional—or worse, political—identification with a given tradition, cannot be truly and fully compatible with esoterism as Schuon has defined it and as René Guénon has understood it. It is true that to this primacy of the kernel, some will prefer to emphasize the protective function of the shell.<sup>26</sup> Such an emphasis is extrinsically valid insofar as it focuses on the collective and traditional continuity that is guaranteed<sup>27</sup> by the shell, but it tends to underestimate or ignore the need for a breaking of the shell, without which there is no access to the esoteric core.

This subtle equilibrium between form and essence is particularly relevant to the definition of exoterism, a notion that may be too easily fixed as the antithesis vis-à-vis esoterism, whereas the interrelation between the two is actually more complex than it would appear at first sight. In this connection, it is important to understand that Schuon's apprehension of exoterism is not one-sided, which no doubt explains some divergences between given interpretations of his work. René Guénon had defined esoterism as the inner core of tradition, which should not be interpreted however, in his perspective, as implying some kind of dependence on the part of esoterism. It is quite clear that for Guénon, esoterism pertains to a different order of reality than exoterism. We find a similar distinction, incidentally, in the teachings of the twentieth-century Sufi Shaykh Ahmad Al-'Alawī,<sup>28</sup> as indicated by the difference that the Shaykh establishes between religion and doctrine. The former refers to exoterism understood as the traditional and formal system of a given confessional world, whereas the latter pertains to the means of reaching God, that is, the esoteric teachings and practices that make what Guénon called "spiritual realization" possible. Schuon's perspective is in full agreement with such assessments, but we can find in his work some more specific considerations clarifying the various dimensions of the relationship between exoterism and esoterism. In an important chapter entitled "Ambiguity of Exoterism,"<sup>29</sup> Schuon proposes to define exoterism in three different ways. Exoterism refers first of all to a set of concepts and practices that define the general religious context. Second, exoterism constitutes a path, a path that can be characterized, by making use of Hindu terminology, as a *karma-yoga*, or a way of action. Third, exoterism refers to a mentality or a spiritual sensibility that is chiefly characterized as a full equation of forms with essence. For this mentality, there is no such thing as a transcending of forms, or even a penetration of their inner and hidden substance. The formal system of a given religion is the only way of access to the Supreme Reality and it has nothing relative about it, nor should



one ask for the reasons of God's prescriptions and injunctions. It is quite obvious that this latter perspective is perfectly incompatible with the esoteric outlook, since esoterism presupposes that forms are only a symbol of, or a pointer to, the supraformal essence. Any absolutization of forms precludes an understanding of their inner message. As for the exoteric system and the exoteric path, they are not in and of themselves incompatible with esoterism, and it must even be said that they play a necessary role in esoteric spirituality. The esoteric understanding of the formal system of exoteric religion is characterized by an intellective penetration of dogmas and fundamental symbols. As for the exoteric path, it provides the esoteric traveler with a framework that is a guarantee, a support and a guardrail. It could therefore be said that the exoteric system concerns first the intelligence: it awakens the Intellect in man by providing keys that allow the actualization of spiritual knowledge. In addition, on the plane of the will and on the level of the soul, the exoteric path orients the former and molds the latter while the intelligence penetrates the inner meaning of actions and the essence of virtues. On this plane, there is a sort of continuity between exoterism and esoterism, whereas the exoteric point of view remains utterly discontinuous with respect to the esoteric perspective. When considered from the standpoint of the objective aspects of Reality, esoterism appears as an interiorizing continuation and perfection of exoterism since the aspects perceived and expressed by exoterism are necessarily perceived and expressed, if only implicitly, by esoterism. However, when the matter is one of subjective point of view, the discontinuity between the two realms is quite apparent since there is no direct way to transmute exoterism as a mentality into an esoteric perception.

## SPIRITUAL AND PSYCHIC INTEGRATION

In the esoteric perspective, the mobility of the Spirit is obviously not restlessness in the negative sense of an agitation; in fact, it is the contrary of an attitude consisting in burning what one had previously worshipped. The latter tendency, which is for Schuon one of the main characteristics of the European mentality, consists in jumping from one absolutization of the relative to the next, burning idols after having passionately embraced them. In perfect opposition to this restless enthusiasm, spiritual intelligence proceeds through a series of negations that aims at preventing any confusion between the Absolute and the relative. This inner attitude perfectly corresponds to Abhinavagupta's definition of Shiva's reality<sup>30</sup> as a constant motion ever transcending the prison of forms. While there exists a systematic negation that characterizes the diabolic and subversive inspiration, there is another kind of negation that deidentifies forms from the essence so as to preserve and extol the freedom of the latter. Esoterism is evidently connected to the latter insofar as it upsets any temptation of resting in the comfort

of a spiritual cocoon, whatever its color might be; as one of Schuon's oldest companions puts it when relating his first encounter with Schuon in his unpublished memoirs, "Comfort stops here!" Indeed, there is an illusory rest in complacency, as there is also a true rest in peace. However, Schuon's perspective cannot be equated, in this respect, with the Zen emphasis on the informal and the paradoxical. Here again, his point of view is one of equilibrium, an equilibrium that in this instance amounts to finding a subtle and mobile interplay between formal and discursive crystallization and supraformal intuition. Schuon's esoterism breaks the husk in order to reach the kernel, but this breaking of the husk is not for him a synonym of doing away with the mediating integrity of metaphysical concepts and spiritual forms. The Intellect as such is free from the limitations and the particular emphases of any specific traditional formalization of Reality, but the rational faculty and the soul belong by definition to the realm of forms. It is therefore of the utmost importance not to confuse these various realms and to put every thing in its right place. From an intellective standpoint, religious and dogmatic forms are neither the first nor the last words in the apprehension of Reality. From the standpoint of the discursive faculty, concepts cannot be avoided and they actually play a positive role in providing man as *animal rationale* with an intellectual mold; however, the intellective and intuitive light gives them a depth of grasp that they could not involve if they were exclusively reason bound. Theological limitations or biases are in no wise necessary to metaphysical discernment. If one were to treat Schuon's expression of metaphysics, or let us say his metaphysical "idiom," independently from an intellective intuition, one would run the risk of petrifying it, depriving it of its living substance. This does not mean, however, that Schuon's metaphysics—or metaphysics as articulated by Schuon—necessarily needs the context of the Islamic tradition, or any other tradition, in order to keep being alive and exempt from being brought down to the level of a theoretical construct. It would certainly remain primarily theoretical for a given individual or a given group who might not actualize it through spiritual, ritual, and moral means, but this does not mean that its intellectual form as such would need the support of Islamic crutches.<sup>31</sup> To claim so would amount to subordinating intellection to theological dogmatism, and even possibly to missing the difference between these two types of doctrinal discourses. Theology takes its concepts at face value, whereas metaphysics considers its own as symbols, no more, no less. It is certainly possible to treat any doctrine, including esoteric metaphysics, in a dogmatic fashion, but such a treatment is necessarily predicated on a radical misunderstanding of the nature and function of sapiential doctrines.

By contrast with the Intellect, which reposes in pure being, the soul lives in change and multiplicity, and it therefore has need of the merciful grace of traditional forms and ambience in order to integrate its variegated aspects. However, the modes and extent of the needs for formal and traditional means in view of

this psychic integration into the spiritual path may very well vary, depending on the makeup, background, animic receptivity, and intellective keenness of each individual. Although both the intellective center and the animic integrative ambience are necessary to a harmonious and efficacious spiritual development, the proportion and modalities of their respective roles span a wide array of diverse possibilities. This explains why the relationship between the anamnesis of the *religio perennis* and a specific religious heredity is such a complex issue. On the most fundamental level, the generic heredity of mankind follows the call of the one and only Religion, but on a psychospiritual level each soul participates, to a greater or lesser extent, in a collective genealogy that informs its relationship with God. Although Schuon has insisted upon the primacy of the primordial strata of man's religious nature, he has also indicated that man cannot ignore the impact of a given spiritual mythology and sensibility upon his soul without depriving himself of deep reserves of *barakah*, or even without running the risk of becoming a house divided against itself.

#### RELIGIO PERENNIS AND SYNCRETISM

In this connection, Schuon has referred several times to the one and only "sub-jacent" religion that he sometimes designated as *religio perennis*. This must not be misinterpreted as meaning that *religio perennis* is a new religion with new rites and new means of salvation—for *religio perennis*, since it is essential and primordial by definition, has certainly nothing new about it, and it cannot exteriorize itself as a religion, that is, as an exclusive system of forms, without contradicting its very nature. This is what some commentators have failed to recognize when dealing with Schuon's concept of *religio perennis*. The latter is essentially an inner reality; it is not a revealed and formal religion. This being said, this inner religion may—and must—affect the ways in which its faithful envisage the rites and dogmas of the formal religion that they practice. This practice, although firmly rooted in the essential symbols of a given religion, may also integrate forms which are directly inspired from above, or borrowed from other spiritual climates, and which may have no direct, formal relation with the traditional framework which is its abode, as has happened many times in the history of mysticism when new forms inspired by Heaven, or by a given cultural ambience, became new ceremonial or ritual vehicles of spiritual blessing. For example, what is more formally different from exoteric Islam than the dances of the *Mevlevi*s?

It is worth mentioning in this connection that Schuon does not hesitate to use traditional concepts outside of their usual traditional context. References to the notion of *Avatâra* and *Bodhisattva* outside of the Hindu and Buddhist contexts, or the use of the term "krishnaite" to refer to spiritual realities that are not specifically Hindu, bear witness to this. A few commentators, including among

those who may boast an esoteric leaning, have been puzzled or troubled by such universal uses of specifically traditional terms. The fact is that Schuon's concentration on the archetypes of spiritual phenomena makes it quite irrelevant to argue the point against his alleged formal improprieties. The esoteric perspective is more interested in what is up the river of tradition, so to speak, than in what lies downstream. It considers spiritual realities in their archetypal roots, and therefore, as the case may present itself, above the formal literalness of any religious system. On the question of syncretism, Frithjof Schuon's perspective is in full agreement with Guénon's inasmuch as it excludes the simultaneous practice of two or more sacred spiritual paths in parallel. On a doctrinal level as well, the esoteric ability to situate a plurality of intellectual perspectives within an essential and objective vision is not to be interpreted as syncretistic. Far from being identifiable to a somewhat exterior accretion of disparate elements, esoterism proceeds from within and envisages the plurality of forms from the standpoint of their synthetic or essential unity. However, Schuon is less absolute than Guénon and some other traditional writers in allowing for the possibility of a formal or aesthetic integration of diverse traditional elements should the need or benefit for it present itself in a particular context and within some limits. The *de facto* conjunction of Buddhism and Shinto in Japan, or that of Shamanism and Christianity in North America, illustrates the legitimacy of this principle. In such cases, the two traditional forms that coexist in a given context function on different and in fact complementary levels. This is a question of subtle spiritual economy, while simplistic exclusions, albeit useful in some contexts, cannot do full justice to the diversity of needs and situations.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the profundity and essentiality of esoterism may give rise to spiritual and formal manifestations of an exceptional character that are the very evidence of its transcendent nature and that one should therefore welcome with awe and gratitude. This kind of spiritual and methodical *istithnâ* (an exception in the traditional syntax) brings with it the shock of a transcendent gift which is offered by God in a direct manner and thus challenges our all too human biases and conventional habits. Such a direct offering is also no doubt connected with the fact that the nature of a plenary esoteric mastery<sup>33</sup> is akin to that of prophecy, albeit obviously not in the sense of a law-giving mission.<sup>34</sup>

Against the notion of quintessential esoterism, it has been objected that the limitations of the human creature make it impossible for us to reach a direct perception of the essence, and that all that can therefore be attained is an obscure perception of esoterism through semantic presence.<sup>35</sup> In other words, this philosophical line of reasoning aims at establishing that pure esoterism is never more than the hermeneutic horizon of an intuition which is always dependent upon revealed forms, and particularly upon the tradition that is ours. In response to this objection, it is first of all necessary to draw a distinction between the universal Intellect and the limitations of human nature, for one can only know God

by God, which amounts to saying that God alone knows himself through man and through Creation. This is not to say however that pure esoterism should be ultimately identified with God, as some have suggested. Esoterism is the most inclusive perspective<sup>36</sup>—neither an object nor a subject properly speaking, but the perspective of the Intellect in relation to the nature of things. In this respect, esoterism is not all mysterious in the sense of an arcane knowledge; its mystery has simply to do with its depth. Without this perspective, which is none other than the *religio perennis*, religion would be somewhat unintelligible, in the sense that there would be no way of understanding what any particular religion is all about without a “decisive intuition”<sup>37</sup> of Religion as such. The religious literality of a given form would remain ineffective were it not for the anamnesis that pertains—most often partially or obscurely—to the Intellect. This does not mean, however, that the *religio perennis* can be reduced to the status of a mere mental abstraction of an intellectual nature,<sup>38</sup> for it essentially implies a spiritual and existential conformity to Reality, or a moral and aesthetic assimilation of the message of the nature of things. As Schuon often reminded his readers: to know is to be.

### THEMES OF MEDITATION

Since, as Schuon has repeatedly emphasized, authentic esoterism is predicated on the principle that “to know is to be,” the stations of wisdom that provide a synthesis of the spiritual content of esoteric wisdom allow us to penetrate deeply into this relationship between knowledge and being. In the last chapter of his book *The Stations of Wisdom*, Schuon provides us with a description of these six spiritual perfections that are ranging over three planes—will, love, and knowledge—and two modes—negative and affirmative. These are (1) “renunciation or detachment, of sobriety, of fear of God,” (2) “decision, vigilance, perseverance,” (3) “generous relaxation, harmony, . . . repose in pure Being, equilibrium of all possibilities,” (4) “fervor, confident and charitable faith,” (5) “discriminative knowledge,” (6) “unitive knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> In gnosis, metaphysical knowledge becomes spiritual being, or spiritual transformation avers and manifests metaphysical knowledge. Accordingly, the six stations of wisdom reveal the essential connection between the knower and the known, between metacosm, macrocosm, and microcosm. They are at the same time divine and universal aspects, cosmic qualities, themes of meditation or spiritual attitudes, and moral virtues.

This may appear quite clear from a variety of approaches, among which the reality of time and space provides an interesting and suggestive example. Time and space are indeed both forms of universal existence and among the most direct and concrete experiences of each and every individual. Let us recall, in

this connection, that time and space, as we experience them on a terrestrial level, are, as Schuon has shown, in a certain sense rooted in the two divine dimensions of absoluteness and infinity. In this sense, the Absolute is the eternal Now of God, whereas the Infinite is God's all-encompassing Space or Presence. On the other hand, our personal temporal and spatial situation is one of the most elementary and accessible elements of our existence, and one that may therefore be used most readily as a wherewithal in the spiritual path.

The second and fourth stations (act and fervor) or themes of meditation share an affinity with time, whereas the first and third (renunciation and peace) pertain to a sense of space. The first station or spiritual perspective, which is like a withdrawal or death, corresponds to a reduction of space to a spaceless point. In this respect, spiritual emptiness is a kind of negation of space, while being at the same time the station of "space that is everywhere the center."<sup>40</sup> The center being "nowhere" is "everywhere." Therefore, the first theme consists in making space for God through a kind of reduction of the space of the world and the soul that amounts to a spiritual death: this is the quality of the North. Analogously, the second station or perspective (spiritual act, perseverance) is a reduction of time to a timeless instant, "the transmutation of time into instantaneity"<sup>41</sup> and the station of "duration that is always present."<sup>42</sup> The time of the world and the soul is annihilated, so to speak, by the repeated affirmation of the Timeless through prayer.

As indicated above, the first and third stations imply a kind of spatial situation for the soul. In the first station, space is *vacare Deo*, emptiness, whereas in the third station—that of peace and repose—it is fullness or plenitude since it contains all that we need and love.<sup>43</sup> As such it is, as Schuon has written in an unpublished text, "infinite center." While the first station involves a state of no space for the soul, the third one may be described as a presence or availability of all of space.

In the same way, time can be envisaged in two complementary aspects as well: while the second station is like a state of no time for the soul, the fourth station is a spiritual affirmation of all of time. In the second station, time pertains to the repetitive effort of man; it is as if time, as a sequential reality, were re-absorbed through repetition into the pure present of Eternity. In the fourth station—that of love and reliance on God's mercy—the human effort collapses or comes face to face with its own limits and powerlessness in and through its confrontation with time as duration, so that the ever-present divine Mercy substitutes itself to this misery of man as a limited and ephemeral being incapable of saving himself. Man descends into a river of Mercy that is ever the same in its flow. As Schuon has written, the second station is that of the "power of oneself" (*jiriki* in Japanese Buddhism), whereas the fourth station pertains to the "power of the Other" (*tariki*). In the second spiritual climate, the emphasis is on the

human whereas it is on the Divine in the fourth one. To this duality corresponds a dual view of time: time is either a discontinuous sequence of spiritual affirmation—from the human standpoint—or a continuous flow of grace—from the divine perspective. In the second station, the emphasis is the sequence of human acts as they spell out human time; in the fourth station, the focus is on the inherent divine mercy that unites all times in a continuous river leading back to the divine ocean. This is, in a sense, the eternal present.

The metaphysical themes, discernment and union, correspond respectively, as Schuon has explained, to the Absolute that excludes and the Infinite that includes. Accordingly, one could say that the fifth station is like absolute time or the reduction of space to pure time—the exclusion of the world—like an annihilating lightning<sup>44</sup> that synthetises all times in a flash. It is the destroying and reintegrating power of Shiva. As for the sixth station, it is infinite space, the reduction of time into pure space—a space that includes the I, or the inner seed that contains everything. It therefore corresponds to the infinite and luminous Night of the Essence.

As we have seen, esoterism is the perspective and language of wisdom in which being and knowing coincide. That is the reason why, on the plane of doctrinal exposition, pure esoterism cannot be limited by the conceptual expressions that account for its reality. Esoterism has often been defined by Schuon as aiming at perfect objectivity;<sup>45</sup> this objectivity has also been defined by him as a conformity to the nature of things. While remaining perfectly sensitive to the spiritual wealth of tradition as the repository of truth and beauty, to morality as the beauty of the soul (rather than juridically and voluntaristically inclined moralism) and to rules of social conduct (generally speaking and without concessions to conventional narrowness)<sup>46</sup> inasmuch as these constitute vehicles of formal approximation of the True, the Good and the Beautiful, esoterism is that which understands and treats phenomena by considering their intrinsic meaning or their archetypes. Esoterism may therefore be defined, synthetically, as the science of the fundamental intentions of the Real.

## VIRTUES AND MORALISM

A word needs to be said, in this connection, about the delicate but important distinction between morality and moralism. As we have seen, Schuon's view of morality is based on a science of virtues that considers the latter as radiations of divine qualities. Schuon's interest in morality does not primarily relate to the conformity of actions, nor even to the social and collective implications of morality; rather, it pertains to the very definition of an integral spiritual life. Morality is not accessory; it is not a kind of elementary propaedeutic for the exclusive benefit of those who are "little gifted," as Schuon puts it humorously.

Guénon's prejudices against morality, which the French metaphysician seems to have conceived of as a kind of rudimentary and exterior dimension of religion, finds little grace in Schuon's integral vision of the soul's journey to God. It is true that in down-playing the status of morality, Guénon was reacting against the limitations of a late-nineteenth-century European and bourgeois concept of religion that stifled any real sense of the sacred and any spiritual aspiration. Still, it belonged to Schuon to qualify this apprehension of morality. Besides the moral requirements of the spiritual path, an altogether different issue is that of moralism, and this requires some attention. One of the most frequent manifestations of moralism, as Schuon has shown, consists in the conviction that a kind of abstract moral perfection is a requisite for grace: in essence, such a moralistic understanding of spirituality amounts to a confusion between the idea of conformity (conformity of the soul to God, to His qualities, to archetypal beauties, in the sense of the Platonic *arête*) and that of formal perfection. As Pascal put it, "He who claims to act as an angel, acts as a beast" (*Qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête.*) Moreover, the Divine does not need our perfection, the Divine is our perfection. On the one hand, God cannot manifest himself through a receptacle that is contrary to his Qualities, through an ugly or dirty vessel, so to speak;<sup>47</sup> on the other hand he cannot but manifest himself in spite of a relative imperfection of the human conduct, otherwise there could be no communication between the Divine and the human. The difference between morality and moralism is, in a sense, that moralism looks at actions—or at appearances of action—while missing the fact that actions as such are only approximations, and it proceeds through psychological and formalistic suspicions, most often interpreting the latter from the standpoint of its own limitations.<sup>48</sup> One of the consequences of this moralistic outlook, when it does not purely and simply border on pharisaism, is to flatten the meaning of spiritual life by bringing it down to the level of individual perfectionism or collective conformism.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, moralism tends toward the two pitfalls of hypocrisy and pretension, and it more often than not entails a radical lack of self-knowledge. According to Schuon, the appearance of moral perfection that is manifested by some atheists and some false gurus is, in the modern world, one of the best evidences of this phenomenon.

## PERSPECTIVES ON REALITY

Esoterism has to do with discernment and union, distinction and integration, difference and sameness. Its intellectual standpoint allows it to discern so as to permit assimilation and union, for only what is real can be assimilated, which is another way of saying that everything can be assimilated to the extent that it is real. It could also be said that by distinguishing between levels of realities, esoterism provides the means of integration of lower orders of reality into higher



ones. The discerning edge of the sword of gnosis is not an end in itself: it opens onto contemplative and unitive knowledge. This complementarity between discernment and integrating union can be best illustrated by the way in which Schuon's esoteric perspective allows him to situate the various religious and spiritual outlooks within the context of the normative totality of the Real, or, to use one of his favorite phrases, within the "nature of things." The specificity of quintessential esoterism by contrast with other religious and spiritual perspectives paradoxically allows a full understanding of the core necessity of these perspectives while integrating these fundamental points of view into the objective totality of gnosis as a discipline of spiritual life. Esoterism is therefore in a position to uncover the spiritual archetype presiding over a traditional perspective—an archetype that always opens onto universality—while revealing the limitations that blind this perspective to the fullness of Reality. Esoterism is therefore more than universalism, more than a mere recognition of the transcendent unity of religions. Such a recognition is only the extrinsic dimension of gnosis, but what matters most for Schuon is to be aware of the intrinsic nature of it, the one Truth that is "hidden under the various forms," to use one of his formulations.

In this context, it may be most helpful to refer to Schuon's classification of the five main ways of envisaging the distinction between the Divine and what lies outside of it. Each negation or misunderstanding of these five legitimate points of view entails a reduction of Reality that ultimately amounts to a limitation of the esoteric outlook.

The first and most fundamental distinction is akin to metatheistic metaphysics such as the Advaita Vedānta and Taoism: it consists in a discernment between the Absolute that lies beyond any distinction, any duality, and *Mâyâ*, which spans from the level of God as a Creator to the least of creatures. Only *Atman* is absolutely absolute in the sense of being totally free from any determination that would bind It to other than itself. It is therefore exclusively on the level of *Atman* that all multiplicity is transcended and that everything may be perceived in the perspective of the essential unity that pervades and sustains everything. The exoteric negation of the Essence or Beyond-Being, or at the very least its implicit inclusion in the theological concept of God, is the most direct and radical obstacle to an understanding of esoterism. As we have indicated in the opening part of this essay, the central consideration of Beyond-Being is the hallmark of all esoteric perspectives, for there is no transcending duality outside the superontological dimension of Reality.<sup>50</sup> Most theological aporia and mystical ambiguities stem from an inability to consider the Divine from this highest standpoint, which amounts to saying that they fail to take into account the notion of *Mâyâ*, or relativity *in divinis*. Now esoterism is most directly founded on a full understanding of the doctrinal implications of this notion.

The second perspective on reality is that of monotheistic traditions: with them the line of demarcation between the Divine and the nondivine passes

between God and his Creation. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam emphasize, to various degrees, this fundamental hiatus between these two levels of reality. In itself, an exclusive focus on this point of view is incompatible with an esoteric perspective since it remains unilaterally focused on the aspect of relationship between God and the world, stressing transcendence and discontinuity at the expense of an integration of the dimension of immanence and essential unity. However, it is also true that a lack of awareness, or worse a rejection of this line of demarcation amounts to an utter distortion of the esoteric perspective. Many forms of pseudo- and neoesoterism are precisely predicated upon the ignorance or blatant denial of the gap that lies between God and the world. A superficial and one-sided understanding of the unity of essence between the Divine and the terrestrial may give rise to aberrant forms of mysticism that amount to no more than spiritually illusory modes of pantheism.

The third perspective includes the Logos within its definition of the Divine. In a certain sense, the Christian point of view, or the Avataric perspective of Hinduism, corresponds to this perspective. Here again, integral esoterism will be incompatible with an exclusive understanding of the Word as embodied or manifested by a given book or Revealer. The frequent tendency of Logocentric spiritual perspectives is to envisage the Divine in the form in which it manifests itself to a given sector of mankind or a given group at the exclusion of other possible modes. In other words, the intensification of the devotional attachment to a manifestation of the Spirit may give rise, not *de jure* but certainly *de facto*, to all the limitations of the bhaktic perspective. This being said, esoterism is keenly aware of the necessity of a Logoic mediator in the spiritual path. The sacramental and spiritual efficiency of the created Logos—who remains uncreated from another standpoint—stems from the fact that man needs to integrate a universal norm and that this norm is embodied by a given Revealer. It is through this Revealer or some of his representatives that a soul may enter the mold of the primordial perfection which Islam envisages as the state of *fitrah* or the way of *hanif*. The most intellectual paths always include some kind of identification with the Logos in the form of a human prototype and model. Since any person is in a certain sense mankind as such, the Higher Mysteries of Divine Union cannot be realized without realizing Human Perfection.

The fourth point of view is that of angelolatry and various forms of polytheism, in which the angels or the gods “essentially represent Divine aspects.”<sup>51</sup> This is also the level of the personal archetypes, or the plane of communication between each servant and the face of the Lord that is facing him or her. In other words, this realm pertains to the particular way in which each soul may come to know the One within the confines of her relationship with him, or as she is “willed” according to his predestined intention. An ignorance of, or a disdain for, this dimension of spiritual life would amount to a dangerously flawed understanding of the way as a dehumanizing destruction of the immortal soul.

Although esoterism tends to focus on the transpersonal substance of the human subjectivity, its discernment of the various levels of reality within the subject will give rise to a full integration of the person within his or her own archetype. Schuon's esoteric perspective allows us to fully understand that the spiritual realization in no way contradicts the crystallization of the immortal soul. The extinction in the Self that constitutes the ultimate goal of the esoteric path is in a sense proportional and simultaneous with the existential actualization of the personal archetype. Moreover, the reality of the personal archetype opens onto the reality of personal prophecy. In a certain sense, this perspective is extrinsically validated by the North American Indian perspective, according to which every man is a prophet. Independently of the misinterpretations to which such a perspective may give rise in an environment as individualistic as that of the modern world, it must be emphasized that this archetypal dimension is part and parcel of the esoteric outlook. In addition, the abusive pressures of overcontrolling authorities and regimenting structures are after all another paradoxical dimension of this individualism on the collective level—in the form of autocratic and institutional power, and esoterism will function, in this connection, as a space of inner freedom, and as a protection against the former.

The fifth point of view is that of Shamanism, which distinguishes between the visible and the invisible, the latter including the animic realm. This most encompassing perspective emphasizes the participation and the integration of mankind into the interdependent totality of the spirits and powers of Nature. This ecological participation in the supernatural vocation of Nature is like the external dimension of the innermost participation in the Self. For Schuon, the spirituality of the North American Indians of the Plains is characterized by the coincidence of the most universal metaphysics and the most integral and primordial way of being. This way of being is expressed first and foremost in a synthesis of moral virtues that comprises domination of self, courage, serenity and generosity. In addition, the primordial and shamanistic perspective cannot be severed from alchemy and white magic, in the sense that the latter constitute a means of integration of the animic substance—including its relatively lower strata—into the perspective of the Spirit. On this ground, as with respect to the interpretation of religion and mysticism, Schuon's thought does not replicate Guénon's. The French metaphysician envisaged the animic realm, and magic as the science pertaining to this realm, in an almost exclusively negative manner. He overwhelmingly considered it as the realm of delusions and temptations. However, the very fact that a prominent Native American spiritual figure like Black Elk could be both a metaphysician and a magician or medicine man should be sufficient proof of the expedient one-sidedness of such a position. This being said, it should be added that Guénon's priority was to counter the phenomenism of occultists and other neospiritualists, and that the obsession of the latter with all kinds of fanciful or dangerous psychic manipulations needed to be denounced

unambiguously. In this prophylactic perspective, the distinction between the psychic and the spiritual appears almost absolute, and the psychic realm can only be the domain of temptations and aberrations. It is the domain in which, to use one of Schuon's poetic formulas, the soul runs the risk of "drowning in its own nothingness." Still, if it were taken literally, a radical distinction between the psychic and the spiritual would amount to a denial of the unity of Being. As it is possible to refer to a psychosomatic dimension, one can also refer to a domain of the psychospiritual, and Schuon actually makes use of this compound adjective in several instances. The psychic plane is after all a relatively external prolongation of the spiritual realm, just as the physical domain is like the external shell of the animic world. Moreover, even though there cannot be any real psychic integration before a clear understanding of the distinction between the psychic and the spiritual has been reached, an exclusive emphasis on the discontinuity between the two realms may preclude an understanding of the need to integrate the animic realm into the spiritual path and to make use of it as a support and a facilitator for the latter. Just as the body must be healthy and strong to provide sufficient support for the spiritual work, the soul can be freed of its hampering knots and may avail itself of the Shakti of cosmic forces in order to provide the best possible ground for the *sadhana*. For those whose intellectualist and civilizationist prejudices may lead to disdain the psychic nature of this level of reality, let us recall this reflection of Titus Burckhardt who, in the context of an explication of the role of archaic dances with animal masks writes, "This is a magic action, but one which may very well be integrated in a spiritual view of things. Since the subtle links between man and his natural ambience do exist, one may make use of them as one makes use of physical conditions. What is important, from a spiritual point of view, is the awareness of the real hierarchy of things."<sup>52</sup>

This is particularly relevant with respect to the connection with what Schuon calls the "celestial quality of Power": this connection can be actualized, among other possible means, through primordial dance, such as exemplified by North American Indian war dances, which is a kind of integration of the microcosm into the macrocosm. The matter is not to cultivate power for the sake of power—for, as Schuon has judiciously and vigorously stated, one can go to Hell with all the powers one wishes<sup>53</sup>—but rather to integrate the various levels of one's being so as to know God with all that one is. The key word of this perspective, that is common to all forms of Shamanism, is "transmutation." "Everything that is human is ours," and everything that is ours is to be transmuted by the Spirit. As opposed to exoteric or eso-exoteric perspectives that tend to proceed through exclusive asceticism or even, on a lower level, through puritanical abstraction, esoterism will tend to transmute animic reactions and states by identification with the Spirit or its Symbol. This is particularly important to underline with respect to the soul's receptivity to beauty, and specifically erotic beauty. The transmutation of aesthetic and erotic emotions through the means of a

sacred symbol, like a Divine Name in *japa-yoga*, constitutes one of the fundamental aspects of psychic integration. Although his intellective nature and metaphysical perspective, his “eagle’s eye” so to speak, did not predispose Schuon to delve extensively into the domain of psychology or alchemy as such,<sup>54</sup> he repeatedly emphasizes in his writings the unavoidable necessity of an “integration of psychic elements.”

Within this context, a few remarks about some of Schuon’s affinities with the world of Amerindian Shamanism may be called for. Schuon’s relationship with North American Indians and, in particular, with the religion of North American Indians of the Plains, can be envisaged from a variety of points of view. Its reality spans personal, doctrinal, and methodical or spiritual domains. Our concern here will not be the personal and biographical aspect of this affinity. We would rather like to emphasize a particular aspect of the more general and fundamental dimensions of the connection between the world of American Shamanism and the *religio perennis*: the metaphysics of Nature. In this regard, it is most important to remember that primordial metaphysics is independent from revealed scriptures, which are only confirmations of the supernaturally natural *ayât* or “divine traces.” In this view of things, the four directions of space as well as animal, vegetal, and mineral creatures enunciate the whole message of the One, and provide the Indian with sacramental and ceremonial supports.

Now, in the realm of Indian mythology, a few notations may provide us with some symbolic pointers with respect to Schuon’s esoteric mode of perception and expression. First of all, we would like to underline the point that the West is the only direction of space that Schuon discusses extensively in his summary of North American Indian metaphysics of nature and the directions of space. At first sight, this seems to be merely prompted by questions that may be raised, from a non-Indian standpoint, concerning the specific symbolism of the West, particularly its paradoxical association with Revelation and its conjunction with the Rain and the Rock. In fact however, it could be shown that Schuon’s esoteric perspective bears a particular affinity with the symbolism of this direction of space. The association of the West with moisture and rain is obviously connected to the dimension of vertical grace (Schuon often makes use of the symbolism of rain to refer to esoterism as such). But this aspect of divine beauty (in Arabic *jamâl*) must be placed in the context of a dimension of divine rigor (*jalâl*) which is akin to the symbolism of lightning. The Thunder-Bird (*Wakiniyan*)<sup>55</sup> which is associated with the West (“My Word is Lightning,” writes Schuon in one of his early German poems, and let us recall his Sioux name, *Wambali Ohitika*, Courageous Eagle) is in obvious affinity with both the spiritual height of esoterism (the “eagle’s eye”) and the fulgurating directness of its Word. In this sense, lightning and eagle share in the same spiritual symbolism. As for the Rock, it is destructive and rigorously purifying as well as merciful when associated with sources spring-

ing from it.<sup>56</sup> This is also an obvious Shivaite signature and, in fact, the Shivaite *lingam* presents significant analogies with these two aspects,<sup>57</sup> since it expresses the penetrating force of masculinity and the fertilization by grace.<sup>58</sup> Even the negative value of the West in Lakota metaphysics, associated with darkness, bears a relationship to Schuon's teachings since the latter addresses Western ignorance and the forgetfulness of wisdom. This Western dimension of esoterism could be pursued in several doctrinal and spiritual directions, but we would simply like to suggest that it may be an important symbolic key to the understanding of Schuon's perspective.

Aside from the five fundamental ways of discerning between levels of reality that we have sketched above in commenting on Schuon's texts, we should also add that the most essential metaphysical perspective amounts to a full acknowledgement of the unity of Reality so that, from this point of view, there is ultimately only God or only Atman. In this sense, even the visible and the physical realms are divine. Matter itself, even though it expresses the densest solidification of Reality while being the most distant from the spiritual source of things, may in fact be considered, in its most elementary and mineral dimensions, as a direct, albeit distant, reflection of the Divine. As Schuon has indicated, the crystalline "intelligence" of minerals is a direct symbol of the Spirit. On another level, the physical reality of plants and animals is a manifestation of cosmic qualities that are participating in the divine archetypes. As for the human body, Schuon has insisted upon its theomorphic nature, in conformity with the principle that the outermost is a reflection of the innermost. On a methodical level as well, the body must participate in the spiritual alchemy; it is a support of the Divine Presence and it has its own way of knowing God. By contrast with Guénon, who tended to perceive the physical realm as a distraction, Schuon's esoteric and integral perspective emphasizes the need to integrate the body in one's understanding and assimilation of Reality.

## ESOTERISM AND PLURALISM

The ability of Schuon's esoterism to envisage the partial validity of a plurality of viewpoints is one of its main extrinsic characteristics. Now, it could be argued that this aspect is in a sense akin to the pluralistic metaphysics of Sufi theosophy in general, particularly to the school of Ibn 'Arabî. This would be true only to an extent, and we propose to show why in the following lines.

According to one of the contemporary representatives of Ibn 'Arabî's school, the Algerian Shaykh al-Amîr 'Abd al-Qâdir, there is no such thing as absolute heresy or atheism in the world, simply because each soul apprehends God in the form of its own limitations. There is no creature that does not

worship God, in the sense of Eckhart's famous saying, "the more they blaspheme the more they praise Him." The diversity of the concepts of God results from the "diversity of theophanies, which is a consequence of the multiplicity of those to whom they are destined and the diversity of their essential predispositions."<sup>59</sup> In this view of things, errors and faults are solely considered as (1) exclusive limitations of the Real<sup>60</sup> and (2) disobedience to the Laws and the Prophets.<sup>61</sup> Such an understanding allows us to understand the diversity of spiritual perspectives, but it does not fully account for the distinction between an orthodox limitation and a nonorthodox one, nor does it make explicit the relationship between limitations and disobedience to the sacred Laws.

This problematic dimension of Ibn 'Arabi's doctrine is connected to the fact that, for him, the principle of evil is situated on the level of God as Supreme Being, since for him *Allāh* is not only the Guide, but also the Misguider (*mudill*).<sup>62</sup> This amounts to saying that good and evil are mixed on the level of Being. This view appears to introduce a certain contradiction in God as Being, and it therefore raises the classical problem of theodicy, that of the contradiction between omnipotence and goodness in God. Ibn 'Arabi's position seems to lead to the perception of an antinomy or even, *cum grano salis*, a certain "evil" in the Personal Will of God.

A passage from Schuon's chapter "The Decisive Intuition" permits us to situate this matter in a more comprehensive and intellectually satisfying metaphysical framework: "While the Divine Essence, being infinite, tends to manifest itself—to project into the finite its innumerable potentialities—the Divine Face first operates this projection, and then—on a still more relative level—projects a principle of coordination within this first projection including a Law destined to regulate the human world, and above all this world in miniature, the individual."<sup>63</sup>

The Divine Essence transcends all relationships and determinations, it lies beyond concepts and images, and it cannot even be envisaged as an Object, be it the Ultimate Object. As for the Divine Face, it is characterized by the gaze that it directs toward the multiplicity of beings that it projects into existence. In this sense, each existent, and each human being among the totality of beings, has a view of God that is conditioned by its state and its belief. As Schuon has emphasized, this is a consequence of the infinitude of the Essence. Now, it is not enough to say that these beliefs are false to the extent that they limit the Reality of God to the boundaries of their understanding; one must also understand that some limitations are adequate existentiations of archetypes, whereas other limitations are rather privations or subversions that not only limit the Reality of God but also constitute negations of his qualities. As for the third level of the Divine Will, that of the coordinating principle or Law, it is precisely a means of approximate conformity to Divine Qualities within the realm of terrestrial experience.

Indeed, Ibn 'Arabî's perspective accounts for it on the sole basis of its guaranteeing human happiness in this world and the thereafter, but the relationship between the nature of prescriptions and proscriptions on the one hand, and their ontological connection with happiness on the other is not really explained. Or else, one does not seem to escape a certain form of legalism that is more centered on the will than on the intelligence. In other words, one cannot simply oscillate between these two extremes, the infinitude of the Essence and the specific demands of the Law, or one cannot solely envisage the conditioning of God by a myriad of determined beliefs on the one hand, and the imperative obedience to the Law on the other hand: one must also consider the level that accounts for the epistemological unevenness among conditioning beliefs as well as for the qualitative meaning and therefore necessity of the Law. In a sense, much of Sufi metaphysics is pulled apart between its sublime nondualism and its legalistic straps. Schuon's esoteric formulation allows us to bridge the gap between these two incommensurable dimensions by insisting upon the "multileveled structure" (to use a phrase coined by Toshihiko Izutsu) of the Divine Will. To the possible objection that Schuon must account for the exclusive and rigorous qualities of Being, one can reply that these qualities are exclusive only extrinsically and in relation to the tendency toward nothingness that characterizes the manifestation. As for Ibn 'Arabî's Qualities, they seem to be dependent on manifestation, they are relationships of the Essence to the Manifestation, whereas Schuon's Qualities are a direct expression of the Perfection of the Essence as Self-Determinations. Evil is not the result of the personal will of a divine Misguider, but rather the unavoidable outcome of the supraontological infinity of the Essence. It goes without saying that such metaphysical mappings should not be treated as exclusive systems of thoughts, but rather as doctrinal pointers whose symbolic nature must never been lost sight of.<sup>64</sup>

As it clearly appears when considering the fundamental question of the Divine Will as with other major instances of metaphysical exposition and spiritual expression, Schuon's esoteric perspective can be best characterized as a science and discipline of objectivity that situates each reality at its own adequate ontological level and within its overarching metaphysical or cosmological context. In doctrinal as in methodical matters, Schuon's thrust lies in a lucid perception of realities that considers both their metaphysical and archetypical meaning as well as the specificity of their plane of manifestation. Thus, in pure metaphysics, the esoterist avoids the pitfalls of confessional, anthropomorphic, and moralist expediency and sublimity by focusing on the dimensions, modes, and degrees of the theophanic unfolding of the Real. He does not confuse metaphysical realities with their partial or distorted contours as envisaged through human biases, nor does he project the limitations of human moral categories onto the Divine Order. At the same time, he perceives the roots of all spiritual,



aesthetic, and moral phenomena in the Supreme, and he accounts for their meaning on the basis of the Divine, thereby describing the multileveled and multifaceted Unity of Being. In spiritual matters alike, esoterism reaches to the essential through the veil of superimpositions and accretions, while elucidating the partial legitimacy of mystical emphases, excesses, and subjective or collective detours. As such, esoterism is nothing less than the most direct and comprehensive language of the Self.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Metaphysical and Spiritual Aesthetics

*The beautiful has its ontological roots far beyond all that is within the comprehension of sciences restricted to phenomena.*

—Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*

Frithjof Schuon was above all a metaphysician, or “philosopher” in the Platonic sense of the term, manifesting himself as an artist only secondarily and as through overabundance.<sup>1</sup> Through its amplitude and profundity, his written opus, such as it is given in his works, suffices unto itself. Moreover, he himself claimed for his work a deep unity and homogeneity outside all effort of extrinsic composition or any quantitative consideration.<sup>2</sup> Regarding artistic expressions of his spiritual perspective, whether poetical or pictorial, they no doubt pertain to a more personal domain,<sup>3</sup> even though they in no way exclude a public showing, as is clearly evidenced by the publication in the United States of a volume produced under his supervision and bringing together a rather large number of his paintings, entitled *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*.<sup>4</sup> In addition, if Schuon was above all a painter and a poet, dance and, to a lesser extent, music also played a very important role in the artistic expression of his spiritual perspective. The inebriating wine of a Gypsy violin always remained for him a nostalgic echo of original beatitude, and dance—from its hieratic and sacred manifestations to its flamboyant and erotic modes—was in his eyes, in a deeply contemplative perspective, like an unfolding of creative joy within the space of this world. The beauty of creatures, that of the nature which surrounds us as well as that of woman as a glorious ray of divine Mercy, also occupies an important place in the spiritual vision that Schuon transmitted. It is enough to say that Frithjof Schuon envisaged beauty as much as a metaphysician as he did as a spiritual master, but also as a *fidèle d’amour*, to take up the fundamental ternary that we have suggested as an interpretive key to Frithjof Schuon’s spiritual personality. We will

thus apply ourselves to distinguishing three fundamental dimensions of the Beautiful: a doctrine of Beauty which pertains to the domain of metaphysical consciousness (*cit*), a methodical and spiritual awareness of the beautiful as a means of grace—which arises from the properly spiritual function of the Master, from his being (*sat*)—, and finally a creative joy, a dimension of beatitude (*ânanda*), which is expressed by his poetical and pictorial productions and by a contemplative receptivity to feminine beauty as a privileged mirror of the Divine. It goes without saying that these three aspects are deeply and intimately linked since it is altogether excluded, with Schuon, to separate metaphysical consciousness from spiritual being and its aesthetic rays. Finally, let us specify that the nature and function of artist which were that of Frithjof Schuon—although secondary in relation to his spiritual and doctrinal function—constitute his gift and the seal of his spiritual perspective;<sup>5</sup> this aspect is directly related to what one could call his “aesthetic” vision of reality, his concentration on the archetype or the intention and not on traditional, juridical, or conventional literalness, at the same time moreover that it accounts for the general style of the most diverse modalities of his extra-artistic expression.<sup>6</sup>

## METAPHYSICS OF BEAUTY

It is particularly difficult to try to express the nature of Beauty, whether one envisages it on the divine plane or even limits oneself to following its tracks in the world of creatures and humans. If this is so, it is first of all by reason of the fact that Beauty is, *in divinis*, the dimension at once most central and most hidden. Every authentic spiritual perspective can doubtless, in quite varying degrees, make its own the Islamic formula “God is beautiful and He loveth beauty,” a *hadîth* frequently cited by Schuon, but how to describe what, for us, is most attached to the notion of form, when it is a question of envisaging the domain of the Divine and of transcendence? This difficulty, this mystery of divine Beauty, is not unrelated to the fact that formal beauty always points beyond itself; it is, in a sense, a principle of inwardness and essentiality. From this point of view, Beauty (*Jamâl*) is the complementary pole of Majesty (*Jalâl*), as Mercy is that of Rigor; it “opens” beings and forms toward height or toward profundity.<sup>7</sup> Inasmuch as it does so, it also expresses itself in a more particular way—in relation to the extrinsic Mercy of *Ar-Rahîm*—through the quality of *Ikrahm*, the “welcoming and benevolent Generosity” that “confers unexpected ascensional graces.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, Beauty participates in the deepest dimension of the Divine and reveals itself as at once dilating and unifying.

However, this fundamentally merciful aspect of Beauty could not exclude a more relative dimension of its mystery *in divinis*. Schuon could thus describe Beauty as the meeting place—in Perfection—of Absoluteness and Infinity,

the second being reflected in the mysterious character of beauty and the first in its formal regularity.<sup>9</sup> In this same regard, Leo Schaya would suggest that “in the Beauty of God, all its Aspects are what they are, in all their relationships and all their reciprocities” and that “in [Beauty], the rigorous Truth that God alone is, differs not at all from His Mercy that unites everything to Him.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, one could say that Beauty is the Mercy of Rigor, but that it is also the Rigor of Mercy. According to the first relationship, Beauty penetrates the Divine Qualities—in regard to their exclusiveness of one another—with a dimension of Infinitude that coordinates and unites them; whereas according to the second relationship, Beauty determines or crystallizes the essential Goodness of the Divine and the manifesting projection that results from it. It is not without reason that the Kabbalah considers Beauty (the *sephirah Tipheret*) as the Heart of God. In the many representations of the sephirotic tree, Beauty is at the center, between the column of Rigor and that of Mercy, on the median axis which also vertically unites the highest and the lowest, the most inward and the most outward. Indeed, Beauty is not only situated between upright rigor and gentle mercy, it is also situated halfway between the inward Infinitude of the Divine Essence and its cosmogonic projection, between the supra-ontological Infinite and the universal Existence that reflects this Infinitude into the manifested world. If the *Avatâra* is by definition a “being of beauty”—he can even save through the grace of his beauty alone, as Schuon reminds us concerning the Buddha—it is by virtue of the fact that divine Beauty is identified in a certain sense with the Word *in divinis*, the prefiguration of *Mâyâ* in *Atman*.<sup>11</sup> The Beauty of the Word is like a crystallization of the manifesting Goodness of God; but it is also the mysterious profundity of Rigor as perfection of Majesty.<sup>12</sup> In the first case, it is the Divine Essence that pierces through the Divine Form; in the second case, it is the Form that reaches the Essence.<sup>13</sup>

One could also say that in God, qualities or aspects can be conceived as beauties in the sense that they constitute perfections; however, the Beauty of God resides less, properly speaking, in these respective beauties than in the equilibrium, harmony, and complementarity that order and unite them. This harmonizing function *in divinis* never means, however, that Beauty should be reduced to the status of a pure perfection of symmetry, for Schuon insists, with Plotinus, on the fact that all beauty includes geometric necessity and musical mystery. Beauty is a totality that penetrates everything; Plotinus described it as “a simple reality, which in a way envelops the object like its *materia*.”<sup>14</sup> It is thus at once center and totality. As center, it is the principle of security, and as totality, the principle of limitlessness: source of security and appeasement because mediating center and principle of harmony of the diverse elements that compose it, space of freedom because plenitude of Infinity. Security and freedom, which—according to Schuon, along with love—constitute the two fundamental characteristics of beauty, relate precisely to the fact that Divine Beauty is at once the central

principle of equilibrium and harmony of the diverse Divine Qualities and the principle of a plenitude that expresses the infinitude of the Divine Principle. One could say that Beauty is in this sense the projection and articulation *in divinis* of the Infinitude of the Essence. If the Beauty of God is thus like a crystallization of His Goodness, it is equally true that the Goodness of God is like the projection or manifestation of His Beauty: it is the Harmony of the diverse Divine Qualities in God as Beauty that renders possible, as if through a prism, their manifestation as expression of His Goodness.

### THE PATH OF BEAUTY

The passage to the human plane involves an inversion of the relationship between inner and outer: “[W]ith man, beauty is outward and goodness inward . . . , contrary to what takes place in the principal order where Goodness is like an expression of Beauty.”<sup>15</sup> In God, Goodness proceeds from Beauty, in the sense that it constitutes the effusion or the gift of Self that, metaphysically speaking, follows the reciprocal harmonization and articulation of the Divine Qualities. In man, conversely, goodness is inward in the sense that it constitutes the answer to the divine effusion, or to manifestation: this response is a gift of self, goodness, love, generosity. Goodness thus results from the deepest and most hidden dimension of man, the one by which he is attached to God and in a way answers God in the center of his being. As for beauty, it radiates rather from goodness, either directly as an outward expression of a state of soul, or more indirectly, as formal beauty insofar as it results from *karma* and thus in a way from a state of being. The first relationship accounts for the fact that the expression takes precedence over the form from the moral point of view, since the good reveals itself in a way in and through the beauty of the expression, whereas it is the form that takes precedence over the expression from the aesthetic point of view, since the radiation of beauty is then independent of the moral reality of the soul,<sup>16</sup> while however reflecting an archetype *in divinis*.

The synthetic and immediate mode, at once intellectual and emotive, that characterizes the perception of beauty renders delicate, and perhaps perilous, all analytical explications of its reality. Speaking of beauty, one risks leaving out what characterizes its deepest reality: beauty is also and especially a direct experience. It is perhaps in part from this subjective character that results the consistent error of relativizing beauty or situating it exclusively in the eye of the beholder, whereas it is in fact an objective reality which is perceived by the eye of the beholder only because he or she bears it in his or her heart. The immediate character of the aesthetic perception reflects the direct grasp of the heart-intellect. According to Schuon, in line with neo-Platonic thought and traditional concepts in general, art and beauty constitute paths of access to the archetypes, which accounts for the

fact that art should never simply copy nature. There is in every form of authentic art a stylization or an essentialization that has as its aim the disengaging of the qualitative root of phenomena. Schuon speaks of this artistic alchemy in terms of a kind of "scorching by the essence."<sup>17</sup> This "scorching" is in a sense analogous to the process of spiritual realization inasmuch as it disengages the personal archetype from the accidental and impure clay and dust of the ego. In this sense, art is a prefiguration of the spiritual path: it is the greatest symbol of the inward transmutation that constitutes the ultimate end of man.<sup>18</sup> Envisaged from the subjective viewpoint of the artist, this stylization finds an inward complement in the restraint, or even parsimony, that must characterize artistic production; this is an important manifestation of the sacrificial principle, which prevents all excess of exteriorization that in a way would venture to exhaust the secret and the mystery.<sup>19</sup>

Art proceeds in fact in the manner of a theurgy or an imitative magic. Beauty attracts angelic presences in the same way that magical and shamanistic imitation attracts powers. This is the descending and catalytic dimension of beauty: beauty as form attracts the infusion of the essence. The prehistoric art of Lascaux and Altamira, just as the pictographs of the American Indians and the Aborigines of Australia, is situated at the confluence of the two domains. It is the animal spirits<sup>20</sup> that paint or draw themselves through the intermediary of man, just as in the icon, God paints himself through the intermediary of the artist.<sup>21</sup> In both cases, the imitation is in the mode of operation rather than in the literalness of the forms. As Plotinus indicates, "[T]he arts do not imitate visible objects directly, but go back to the reasons from which the natural object has issued."<sup>22</sup> Art is thus properly speaking an imitative and participative magic,<sup>23</sup> whence the determinative role imparted to the aesthetic ambiance in the spiritual perspective of Frithjof Schuon.<sup>24</sup>

It is appropriate to analyze here the fundamental importance of beauty as principle of inward transmutation. One may say that this function presents itself principally in two forms, one corresponding to the descending and theurgic aspect of beauty, and the other to its ascending and mystical aspect.

In the domain of the spiritual method, the theurgic aspect constitutes an imitation of the beauty of God on the plane of the soul. In the last chapter of *Stations of Wisdom*, Frithjof Schuon describes spiritual and moral beauty as an equilibrium between diverse centripetal tendencies: this equilibrium or this harmony between exclusive and inclusive virtues, the static and the dynamic, reproduces on the human plane the celestial beatitudes and the fundamental Divine Qualities. These pertain to ascetic purity (exclusive and static), combative vigilance (exclusive and dynamic), serene peace (inclusive and static) and trusting love (inclusive and dynamic). This horizontal quaternity concerning the plane of the normative soul is further completed by the zenith of discernment between the Real and the illusory and the nadir of union with the Real, these last two

aspects pertaining to intellective consciousness, one in discriminative mode and the other in unitive mode. The sixth aspect corresponds to the Divine Self as such, as infinite, inward limitlessness, the fifth corresponding to the Divine insofar as it may be objectified as unique Reality, reducing relative beings to nothing, including the individual subject. According to this schema, beauty of soul constitutes human perfection such as it is expressed in the equilibrium and the harmony of the diverse stations and virtues. To the extent that only like may be united with like, one could speak of the realization of this spiritual perfection as a kind of aesthetico-moral theurgy.<sup>25</sup> Once again, God paints himself in and through man, by inviting his free and active cooperation, which expresses the deepest stratum of his liberty in conformity to his essence of being created in the image of and in resemblance to his Creator.

It is appropriate to note, in order to complete what has just been said on normative beauty of soul as portrait of the sage, that the third perfection or station of which we have just spoken in fact reveals in itself a very particular affinity with beauty. According to the first relationship envisaged above, beauty is an equilibrium of the soul between diverse perfections or virtues which are the reflections of the Divine Qualities; according to the second relationship, the perfection or virtue of serenity and of peace maintains a privileged relationship with the spiritual reality of beauty to the degree that contemplative calm results from a repose in being.<sup>26</sup> This repose in being is beauty of soul in that it brings out the deep and real nature of the human subject come from the hands of God.

According to the ascending or mystical relationship, the aesthetic vibration that results from the encounter with objective beauty constitutes the way of access to the heart and it even imposes itself as a fundamental element of inward alchemy as fusion of the soul. In fact, beauty proceeds through *solve* and *coagula*, it liquefies the hardened heart by allowing it to be transformed and then fixed through similarity to the being of the beauty that it contemplates, in a manner basically analogous to the *modus operandi* of the Sacrament or of the Divine Name being contemplated. Owing to an emotive and existential nature, the aesthetic vibration directly touches the center of one's being, immobilizing it in the plenitude of its profundity or shaking and rousing its rigidity or its torpor through contact with the deepest zone of the heart. Plastic beauty proceeds rather according to the first of these modes, whereas musical and erotic beauty proceeds according to the second. Whatever the mode, the emotive flavor proper to the aesthetic experience must be followed to its source, the center of one's being, wherein dwells *Atman*. Methodically and spiritually, the blend of the sacramental symbol—the Divine Name in *japa-yoga*—and the subjective vibration provoked by the beautiful corresponds to the conjunction of the static and masculine absoluteness of the Real with its dynamic and feminine infinitude. The objective is subjectified and assimilated by virtue of aesthetic fusion, whereas the subjective is objectified and reintegrated along the axis that orders

its transformation in orienting it toward the inward. This is an immediate experience that transcends the discursive functioning of reason without, however, at all excluding the intelligence. In fact, the character of direct perception ("but a glance ought to suffice") takes account of the intellective and cardiac enrootedness of the experience of beauty. This latter is the instantaneous recollection of what we are. In the same sense, Plotinus taught that the principle of beauty is "a reality perceived at first glance, a reality that the soul identifies as a previous knowledge, recognizing it, receiving it with favor and putting itself in unison with it."<sup>27</sup> It is plausible that the visual arts be of a more intellective (geometrical) nature and the musical arts of a more cardiac (musical) nature, or that the former touch on the domain of discernment (as the visual term "to discern" indicates), whereas the latter concern more the element of union in the sense of fusion with the archetype. In fact, however, this distinction is only relative since all forms of authentic art are after all modes of intellection; which, for example, leads Schuon to note that "there is more intelligence in African rhythms than in most psychological novels."<sup>28</sup>

## POETRY

The character of synthetic totality belonging to all true art also concerns poetry as mental beauty. For Schuon, poetry always results from the meeting of an archetype with an inward beauty, a beauty of soul. Poetry should be a function of the perception of an archetype, which is crystallized in the form of images. This crystallization is necessarily a function of the soul of the poet, so that the beauty of the archetypal content could not in principle be independent of the beauty of the animic container: poetry is the song of the soul.<sup>29</sup> In fact, however, the function of medium that is incumbent upon the poet can give rise to the manifestation of a beauty on the basis of a very imperfect human support. Here again, it is appropriate to beware of all vision of inspiration that would be too geometric and would ignore that the "Spirit bloweth where it listeth."

According to Schuon, it is appropriate to define poetry as a form of art by virtue of which the essence goes to meet the form, in the sense that the perception of an archetype is crystallized in the images as well as in the meter: "In poetry, the musicality of things, or their cosmic essentiality, irrupts on the plane of language."<sup>30</sup> The difference between poetry and music and dance is that in the latter it is the form that goes toward the essence in the sense that the melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic development points toward the essence,<sup>31</sup> either through emotive fusion, or through reduction of multiplicity to unity, or again through conformity to the very structure of our profound being. As Schuon has indicated in one of his poems, music is successively joy in the multiple and nostalgia for the One.<sup>32</sup> The two aspects converge in the drunkenness of Infinity.



It is in virtue of this principle of extinctive inebriation that Schuon can define music as a flowing back of the accidents toward the Substance.<sup>33</sup> On the plane of subjective perception, this flowing back must be considered as a remembrance of our deepest nature.<sup>34</sup>

In poetry, in contrast to music and dance, the infusion of the essence into the form is confirmed by the fact that there is no traditional poetics in which the container is not subordinated to the content, whether this content be envisaged as harmony (*sâman*) in India, the natural principle (*li*) in China, or inward meaning (*ma'nâ*) in Islam. In every great poem, the linguistic form is subordinated to the essence by being integrated into the inward perception of the poet. Different from sacred Scriptures, in which, according to Schuon, the human word bursts under the pressure of the divine inspiration, poetry orders and incorporates the language to its end. To do so, it is nevertheless necessary that the poet undergo the experience of an inward pressure.<sup>35</sup> During the last years of his life, Schuon produced a considerable poetical work in his mother tongue, German, while expressing several times his personal desire to see this work come to an end. The inspiration had a character of necessity that seemed to impose itself over the very will of the poet. It is not rare that spiritual masters thus exteriorize their message at the end of their terrestrial life, in a synthetic and direct manner that puts into relief the spiritual urgency that is expressed by the always present—but always avoided by the ordinary man—proximity of death. This amounts to a sort of essential recapitulation that finds in the poetical genre a form perfectly adapted to its aims. It is moreover principally in short forms that this coincidence between essential content and synthetic form is realized most clearly. The most beautiful of poems is a “gem of perfection and vibration of infinitude.”<sup>36</sup> In it, as in every form of beauty, absoluteness and infinitude thus meet. In the West, it is often in the sonnet, with a Dante or a Shakespeare, that the maximum of formal contraction is combined with the vastest plenitude. Schuon's poetry is also characterized by its centered density and its powerful suggestiveness. One may compare Schuon's mode of expression with that of Angelus Silesius and with that of Lalla Dal. Lalla's *vakhs* are short poems of four verses, whereas the *Cherubic Wanderer* of the seventeenth century German mystic, even more marked by intuitive conciseness, is composed of couplets. We thus find with Schuon something of the poetical convergence of the German mystic of the Essence—in a sense, the most imaginatively bold and jnanic Christianity—and the femininity of India, two fundamental poles of the spiritual archetype expressed by his artistic personality. With Lalla as with Silesius, the poetical expression is characterized not only by a certain formal conciseness, but also by clarity and sobriety of expression and by the incisive vigor of the images. One also finds here a direct, even audacious and implacable, character in the modes of spiritual expression.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Schuon's poetry is less allusive—as Japanese poetry can be, especially the haiku—than didactic and symbolical; it thus insists

on continuity between spiritual intuition and language, rather than seeking to disjoint or burn the latter for apophatic ends. This aspect of Schuon's poetry is doubtless related to the normative and integrating function which devolves upon the Logos and upon reason in the spiritual perspective opened by Schuon. Likewise, the intellectual conciseness of poetical expression in his opus is explained in large part by the fact that in the final analysis Schuon has little affinity with the imaginative exuberance and hyperbolic expression of Sufi poetry. For Schuon, it is rather a question of producing a poem in which the form is firmly subordinated to the content that orders it. Schuon scarcely insists on poetical multiplicity of meanings—clearly without denying it—probably because he intends to reach right to the heart of the matter and to remain distant from the pitfalls of a literary relativism in fashion today. Be that as it may, the fact that Schuon's poetical opus was almost exclusively composed in German, his mother tongue, indicates to what extent poetry constitutes for him the language of the soul, in a sense at once individual and collective. By contrast, his expression in prose, almost uniquely reserved for the French language, pertains to the mind or to reason inasmuch as it constitutes a reflection of the Intellect. The virtues that Schuon recognized in German and French refer respectively to the power of imaginative and symbolic evocation, which is definitely related to the psycho-spiritual, and to analytical precision, which is consonant with the conceptual expression of the spiritual.

Schuon's first poetry, notably that of *Sulamith*,<sup>38</sup> spiritually indebted to the "Song of Songs," echoes German romanticism and Sturm und Drang; it is also perhaps more centered on the aspect of perception than on that of transmission, at least in the sense that it reveals more an inebriation with the archetypes than a concern for teaching. The poetry of the last years of Schuon's life—in a way his sapiential and poetical testament—is more didactic, generally more sober, and in a sense simpler and more universally accessible. If this is so, it is doubtless because it is more centered on the mode of assimilation pole, in virtue of a concern for teaching, rather than on the mode of perception pole. It also constitutes a more synthetic and in certain respects more direct type of teaching than that given in his prose books. The frequent recourse to the second person, which one finds moreover with Angelus Silesius and to a lesser degree with Lalla Yogeshwari, bears witness to the didactic aspect of this poetry. More profoundly still, it reveals an intellectual perspective according to which the soul is envisaged as interlocutor of the Intellect or the Spirit.

## PAINTING

Schuon's pictorial opus is fundamentally one in its principles and its modes of execution. It is always a question of transmitting an inward vision, or at least

spiritual qualities that are manifested in the oeuvre not in virtue of a deliberately didactic or symbolist concern, but in virtue of the exteriorization of the inward. This unity, however, does not in the least forbid us from distinguishing certain phases in Schuon's development. The idea of phases or periods here does not go back to an artificial concern for originality or innovation. It is rather a question of the transformation of the Spirit that burns forms in order to prevent all deadly fixation, in virtue of the freedom of the Spirit that bloweth where it listeth. The artist in no way aims at exhausting possibilities still unknown or escaping the indefectible permanence of the Real, his intention being on the contrary to affirm the Real by detaching it from sentimental fixations that risk enclosing the life of the Spirit within the reassuring but sterile circle of a definitive style. Schuon placed the accent on the fact that the need of change for its own sake is the mark of a certain spiritual superficiality and thus of an incapacity for being nourished by beauty insofar as it offers us at once a richness of aspects and a virtually infinite depth of interiorization. However, he has also stressed that artistic creation, in the image of the grace of which it constitutes an analogy on the plane of art, could never exclude a freedom of expression that modulates and perfects the traditional canons rather than contradicting them.<sup>39</sup>

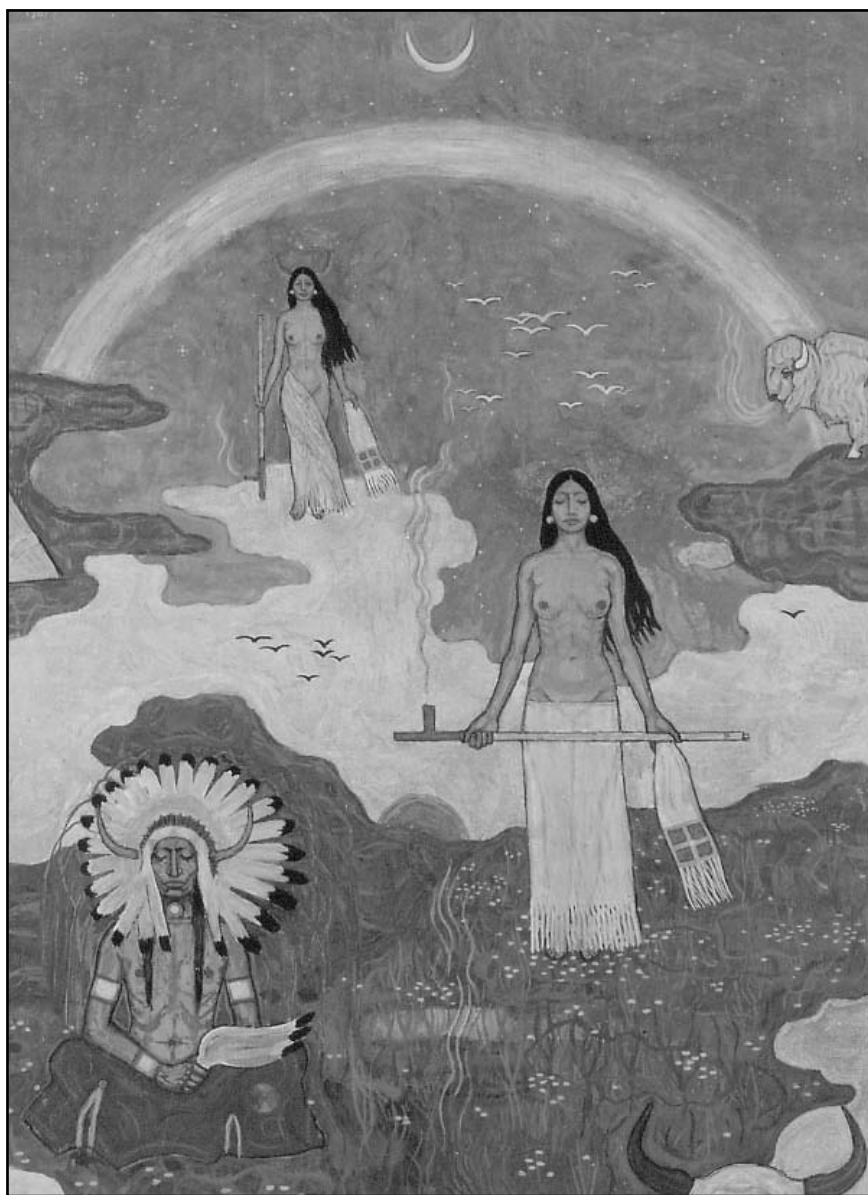
In fact, so little does Schuon pursue originality in the sense in which it is generally understood in our time, that he does not hesitate to integrate into his opus as material what the work of certain contemporary painters can offer in terms of primordial flavor and qualitative insight. We are thinking especially here of works by Gauguin and Hodler and perhaps also of some by Van Gogh. The fact that these three painters react against the academicism of rationalist or realist tendencies and the visual subjectivism of the impressionists is not by chance: Schuon's formal language expresses at one and the same time a rejection of what in realism is flat and opaque in relation to the archetypes as well as a distinct distance in relation to all visual confusion and all geometric disjointedness of natural forms—types of approach that betray on the one hand a certain sensorial superficiality and on the other hand a kind of mathematical and abstract derealization. Schuon's affinity with Gauguin doubtless results from the perfume of virginal and primordial innocence that emanates from the best of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings. It also imposes itself by virtue of the use of colors in *cloisonné*, which in terms of technique is akin to *Ukiyoe* Japanese painting and, regarding the ambiance, evokes an earthly paradise in which the colors are like archetypal qualities translucent to the divine Light. Concerning Hodler, in addition to the style of certain background landscapes, it is especially on the plane of composition and to the hieratic or symbolic character of certain of his best works that Schuon refers as a point of departure. It is thus that one can notice with Schuon, as in Hodler,<sup>40</sup> a tendency to make movements instantaneous and to concentrate space in his compositions. Space may thus through the composition and distribution of the figures be oriented according to either the

vertical axis or the cardinal points. Sometimes even, and as a complement, the narrative character of the composition reveals the suprahistorical instantaneity of the spiritual event, as in the very beautiful painting of the descent of the Calumet offered by Pte San Win, the White Buffalo Cow Woman. It goes without saying that these influences, or rather these affinities, constitute only the skeleton of a formal language that is developed by Schuon with a pictorial genius that is his own and could never be isolated from the spiritual infusion that animates it.

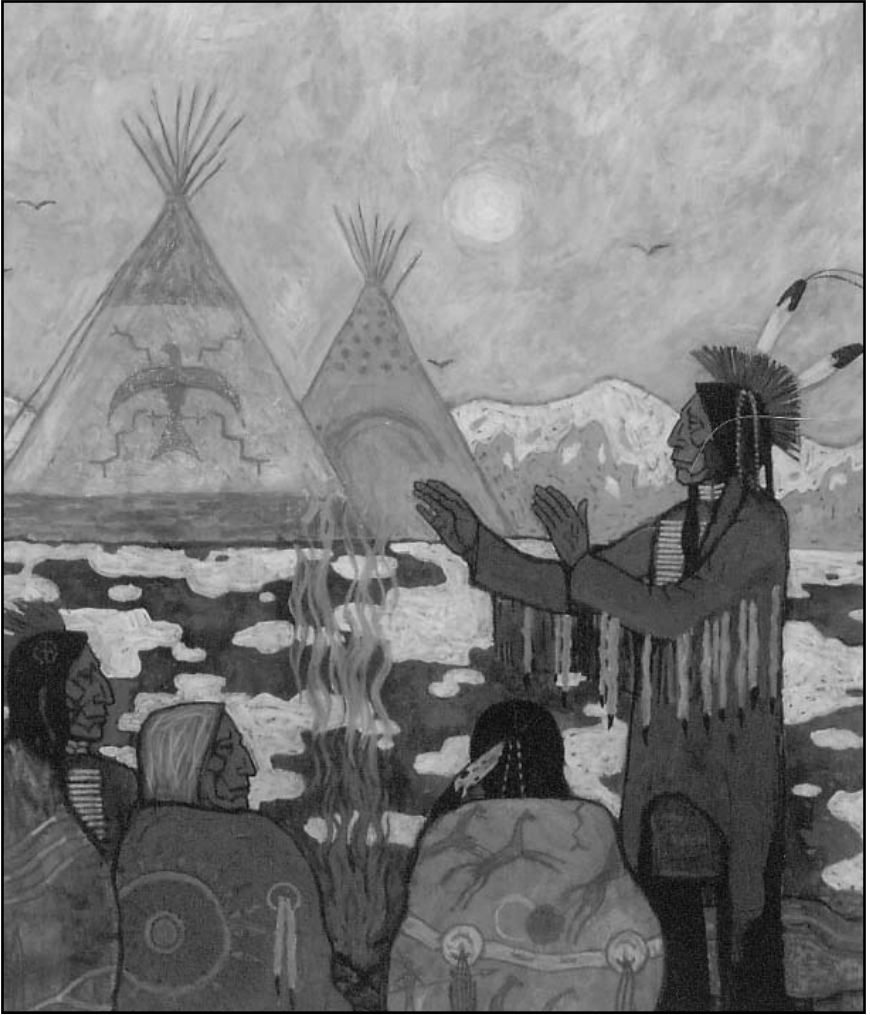
Another characteristic technique important in Schuon's paintings resides in the fact that their lines are clearly drawn, as if to emphasize the presence of the archetypes. In this regard, Schuon is in consonance with an aesthetic perspective placing the accent on the transcendent permanence of the ideas, much more than on the evanescence of forms in the face of the One. Thus Schuon is attached more clearly to the Western tradition than to the metaphysical tendencies of the Far East, which tend to extinguish individual realities within the aura of the Perfect Void. If one may nevertheless speak of an aura in Schuon's painting, it is rather that of deep golds and heavenly blues, which evoke a solar *'Isawiyah* aspect and a Marian aspect of infinitude.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, on the plane of composition, it is also important to stress the suggestive impact of contrastive interplay, oppositions, and complements, in matters of both forms and colors. Schuon likes to juxtapose complementary colors and physical postures, paired characters set in a contrastive composition: standing/sitting, man/woman, nudity/clothing, orange and green, blue and yellow, but also fire and snow or motion of the winds and centered immobility of the bodies and weapons of stoic warriors. This type of binary composition may suggest two important aspects of his metaphysics: on the one hand, the interpenetration of opposites that is expressed by the symbol of the yin/yang, a fundamental reference in his perspective, and on the other hand, the intuitive transcending of all polarities in a fulgurating return to Unity. Juxtaposing a warrior standing with closed eyes with a sitting woman with open eyes, Schuon expresses, through this type of combination, the nonexclusive interplay between affirmation and negation, transcendence and immanence, with a view to sharpening a metaphysical acumen that never stops short at purely rational or moral alternatives.

The subjects treated by Schuon are essentially of two types: the world of the American Indians envisaged in its sacerdotal hieratism and heroic dignity, and the world of femininity, from its virginal innocence in the genre of Gauguin to its mysterious inwardness in the icons of the Virgin. This choice of subjects is absolutely determinative, for it is from the beginning through them that Schuon sovereignly affirms his spiritual identity as an artist, beyond the technical components that he may partially borrow from other painters. The encounter of Shamanic Primordality and Celestial Femininity here is far from fortuitous. The Hindu notion of the Shakti indeed can be applied at once to Nature and to



*Pte San Win and the Descent of the Sacred Pipe, painting by Frithjof Schuon, 1967.  
With permission of the Schuon Estate.*



Painting by Frithjof Schuon, 1961. With permission of the Schuon Estate.

Woman. These two aspects fundamentally pertain to the existential and “ecological *barakah*” to which Schuon referred several times during the later part of his life.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, is it not significant that Schuon can speak of Shakti, a term that he ordinarily reserves for Femininity as the principle of creative energy, in relation to the natural elements and the animal spirits that virtually constitute the angelic presences within the world of the American Indians?<sup>43</sup> It is in this context that dance, the primordial form of worship,<sup>44</sup> in which Strength

unites with Beauty, constitutes a privileged means of assimilation of spiritual energies and of realization of the archetypes, particularly the celestial quality of Power. The character of artistic totality proper to this form of art is illustrated in India by the fact that it is from it that all the other arts are derived. It is also expressed conversely by the fact that dance recapitulates the other forms of art and offers a synthesis of them, thus constituting in itself, parallel to its nature of universal language, a path of return to primordiality. Imitative and participative, intellectual and existential, it makes intelligence descend into the body, breaking the abusive monopoly of discursive reason and thus expanding our consciousness of the Divine in the direction of amplitude.

### IMMANENCE AND FEMININITY

On the literary plane, one could say that the beauty of Schuon's opus resides precisely in the interpenetration that is always present between rigor and mercy. Our first contact with the published work of Frithjof Schuon, at the end of the 1970s, thus left us with the feeling of a profound mercy drawing us toward it through the prism of intellectual rigor and a formal crystallinity not exclusive of an almost mellifluous musicality.<sup>45</sup> It is thus that a refined sense of nuance coexists in this oeuvre with the implacability of discernment. There is no author more categorical than Schuon when the dazzling evidence of principles imposes itself, but there is no one more attentive to the paradoxes, the compensations and the complex play of necessary exceptions, as also more refractory to the pious simplifications of spiritual opportunism.

Certainly the oeuvre reveals a very relative evolution in its modes of expression. One may thus think that one is moving *grosso modo* from a style in the first works that is more Guénonian to a more complex or poetical style that finally ends in a quintessence that is at once simpler, more synthetic, and more direct. There could never be a question of a hierarchy of these different periods since they correspond to so many contexts or necessities that are dictated by the nature of things. There is first the formal influence of Guénon—without its being possible, however, to speak of him as a “master” in relation to Schuon—and then the conceptual and literary expansion of an opus that affirms its profound originality before gathering itself together with an aim of the most universal and essential teaching. Likewise, but in a different way, the pictorial oeuvre could not exclude a certain development; it thus seems to us that one can perceive a passage from a more hieratic style to a more embodied style that belongs more to the art of sculpture. This evolution consecrates the passage from a preponderance of static and noble asceticism, in a nonexclusive and nonpenitential sense, to an insistence on the energetic or the shaktic. It is plausible that the energetic dimension is more ambiguous, at least extrinsically, or that it gives

rise to more diverse perceptions and interpretations, precisely because it implies a deployment in the direction of forms, or let us say that it concedes to them a maximum of legitimacy on the plane of exteriorization. We would be tempted to say that there enters in here something of the distinction—which it would not be appropriate to draw too sharply—between the spiritual perspective of *Advaita* and that of *Tantra*: the first is essentially founded upon the discrimination (*viveka*) between the Real and the illusory, whereas the second leads illusion back to its source in the Real by making use of the reflections of the Real within illusion. These two dimensions, although methodically divergent within Hinduism, are fully present in Schuon's perspective of quintessential esoterism insofar as they correspond fundamentally to the two complementary poles, one discriminative and one unitive, of the Path. It is not forbidden to think that this complementarity is reflected in Schuon's pictorial production, which includes paintings of the Virgin with closed eyes and others, more rarely so, which represent her with the eyes open. In this regard, the closed eyes of inwardness may symbolize the affirmation of transcendence whereas the open eyes, in addition to their aspect of spiritual irradiation, integrate into the spiritual work the dimension of immanence. The two aspects are consecutive from a certain spiritual point of view—for one can open one's eyes only after having closed them—while being indissociable from the most fundamental metaphysical point of view, since there is but one Reality.

One might wonder why the icon plays such an important role in the work of Schuon, whereas his function of spiritual master was conducted within the framework of the Islamic tradition, a tradition whose iconoclasm is archetypal. Similarly, one could be astonished that the intellectual character of Schuon's perspective is not expressed artistically through recourse to abstract and non-figurative forms of art. In fact, it is appropriate to emphasize that nonformal wisdom, or the *sophia perennis* which Schuon never ceased to present and illustrate, is obliged to incarnate itself in the form of art that is least abstract and most embodied, namely the reproduction of the *Avatāra* or of humanity in its theomorphic dimension. Extremes meet. Not only is the Word identified with the Beauty of God, but the supraformal and feminine aspect of the Logos is expressed by the Virgin inasmuch as she is form of the nonformal.

Another important question relates to the frequency of nudity in Schuon's oeuvre. Here also it is appropriate to isolate this artistic phenomenon from the circumstantial framework of its religious background. Even if the cyclic conditions may render circumstantially problematical the outward manifestations of its mystery on the collective plane, nudity arises from the mystery of inwardness; and just as the beauty of God—the most inward quality and reflection of the nudity of the Essence<sup>46</sup>—is manifested on earth in the most outward order, so inward beauty insofar as it reflects the nudity of the Self is revealed *ad extra* in corporal nudity. Schuon liked to cite the poetry of the Kashmiri yogini Lalla



Yogeshwari or Lalla Dal, whom he considered highly representative of this mystery: "My guru gave me but a single precept. He told me: 'from without enter thou into thy most inward part.' This for me became a rule: and this is why, naked, I dance" (Lalla Vakyani, 94).<sup>47</sup>

Just as traditional and religious forms cover the truth of the pure Self, so garments insofar as they are the forms of functions and cultures cover the original and primordial nudity of man. The realization of the Self is the passage beyond forms. In this connection, some have cast a metaphysical suspicion upon the correlation between the theme of nudity, the doctrine of quintessential esoterism, and what they consider to be a dialectical temptation of an integral unveiling of the truth by way of concepts, in other words, a lack of awareness of the negative or apophatic dimension of metaphysics; a temptation to say everything to the last word and to unveil everything to the last reality. On this matter, it is true that Schuon does not make use of Guénon's terminology that defined the supreme Principle as "Non-Being." This term seems to him inappropriate insofar as it emphasizes the negativity of the Absolute, whereas this negativity is meaningful only with respect to the limitations of relativity and not in itself. These critics of Schuon who reproach him for giving precedence to a metaphysical language of an affirmative type, a language that would practically exclude—for them—modes of apophatic expression, interpret this cataphatic bent of his thought as a kind of conceptual imperialism. One cannot deny that Schuon's metaphysical doctrine favors the *via affirmativa* in conformity with an emphasis on the principle of adequacy of the Intellect and the Word with Reality. Now, this should not be a matter of great surprise given that such a perspective is in fact fundamentally normative in regard to the supernaturally natural capacities of human faculties. On the other hand, Schuon has always considered himself a European, in spite of the deviations of post-medieval Europe, and his mode of metaphysical expression is not primarily symbolic, allusive, and apophatic like that of many Asian metaphysicians: it gives precedence to concepts as expressions of the truths that are immanent in the Logos. It must be added that this emphasis answers a very profound need in the contemporary world in which doctrinal affirmation and spiritual experience tend to be dangerously disassociated, either out of intellectualist excesses or out of an empiricist realizationism that holds doctrinal concepts in contempt. In this context, it is therefore important to stress the positive and necessary function of concepts and language in order to prevent any informal, pseudomystical, or sentimental drifting away from authentic esoterism. However, it must be added that Schuon's writings consistently refer to the limits of cataphatic expression and to the gap that separates any conceptual system from Reality. For Schuon, doctrine cannot be more than a set of points of reference with a view to a realization or an assimilation that transcends all conceptual limitations. He does not even hesitate to specify that "the most explicit metaphysical doctrine will always take

it as axiomatic that every doctrine is only error when confronted with the Divine Reality in Itself.”<sup>48</sup> It could actually be added that this lucid and ever awake awareness of the distance separating concepts from Reality is one of the manifestations of a sense of proportions that could be characterized as an intellectual dimension of the sense of aesthetics.

If nudity is frequent in Schuon’s pictorial opus, it is because it is like the sacerdotal garment of esoterism.<sup>49</sup> Extrinsically, it is also plausible that the manifestation of sacred nudity had a positive role to play as antidote to the trivialization and profanation—most often unconscious—of the human body in the modern world. The deepest way of revealing the corruption of a phenomenon does not in fact consist in dissimulating or excluding its manifestations—which is the concern of social and moral constraints inasmuch as they are like protective boundaries—but in exalting and explaining the sacred norm whose corruption has led astray its message. There is no better protection than the truth.<sup>50</sup>

Feminine beauty plays a preponderant role in the spiritual alchemy that issues from the oeuvre and spiritual personality of Schuon. It is appropriate to recall in this relationship that Schuon’s perspective is no stranger to the highest expressions of gnostic Sufism. Ibn ‘Arabî and Rûzbihân al-Baqlî, among many others, have put the accent on the central role of the contemplation of woman in inward work. Both also considered woman as the central theophany of terrestrial experience. And it is at the very least surprising that a certain contemporary Islam, dried up by moralistic infiltrations of modern inspiration, can take umbrage at the spiritual manifestations of adoration of the Lady, whereas the Prophet is a generous incarnation in this regard. Three points must be emphasized in this domain. First, the feminine theophany must be comprised in the most general framework of the theomorphic character of humanity. The intensity, or the direct character of the human theophany accounts *a contrario* for its ambiguity and for its requirements concerning contemplation. Second, feminine beauty constitutes the central manifestation of this theophany in the sense that it corresponds outwardly, by virtue of inverse analogy, to the most inward dimension of the Divine. The passage from the “Song of Songs” often cited by Schuon, “*nigra sum sed formosa*,” refers quite particularly to this mystery, in emphasizing the coincidence of inwardness with beauty. And third, the contemplation of feminine beauty presupposes a theophanic conception of the created symbol, a conception according to which beauty is fundamentally that which it communicates. It would thus be totally wrong to conceive of the importance of beauty only as a concession to the world, namely to human weakness. Schuon always cautioned his readers against the facile reduction of the aesthetic and the erotic to illusion and sin. As James Cutsinger has quite rightly remarked,<sup>51</sup> the ambiguity of the feminine principle, or *Mâyâ*, even though real and inevitable on the plane of earthly experience, could never imply a perfect spiritual symmetry between the exteriorizing function of Eve and the interiorizing mystery of Mary.

Still, it is appropriate to add that the exteriorization at issue should never itself be envisaged in an entirely negative manner. Exteriorization corresponds after all to an intrinsic necessity *in divinis*, and it is thus only consequential and legitimate that this possibility also be manifested on the human, indeed the spiritual, plane. It will quite evidently then be a question of an exteriorization in view of interiorization, and certainly not of an end in itself which would then be deifugal, indeed Luciferian. Woman is a principle of interiorization, but she is also a principle of energy: feminine beauty inspires in both senses of the term. She inspires man toward the inward, but she also inspires in him the vital solar energy without which “man in his lunar aspect withers away.” Amaterasu Omikami, one of the privileged feminine figures of Schuon’s spiritual world is, let us not forget, the founding solar divinity of Japan, and Schuon does not hesitate to depict the Virgin in her solar and royal aspect, that of the “woman clothed with the sun.” With Schuon, there is no either/or: the perception of concrete feminine beauty is in itself an experience of infinitude, and as such it is a reservoir of energy and creativity, and yet again a path of interiorization. But because of man’s dual nature, this experience is also exposed to ambiguity precisely to the degree of the profundity and essentiality of its object, since human beauty is congealed beatitude. Whatever the discords and ambiguities that are comprised for most people in the fundamental experience of sexuality—physical or psychic—the recognition of feminine beauty is for primordial and normative man, or man as such, an encounter with his own divine center. This encounter, however, can be turned to account spiritually only to the degree that the sacramental power of the Symbol or of the Divine Name universalizes and interiorizes the perception of a beauty that is necessarily particular and outward. Only the Divine Means enables resisting temptation and not falling into idolatry in fact; or, as Sa’di says, “It is not fitting that just any gaze contemplate a given beauty—except for you who draw around yourself the protecting circle of the Divine Name.”<sup>52</sup>

One may ask oneself what the contemplation of human beauty is for a woman. In fact, to the degree that love is a quasi-angelic awareness of our nature, it can concern humanity only in its totality, whatever one’s sex. However, the mode of contemplating the feminine and the one which relates to the masculine are not the same. The contemplation of woman is an experience of totality, of an unfolding in the direction of the infinite. Indeed, on this plane, woman is identified with *Mâyâ*, the principle of unfolding toward the outward or of expansion toward the infinite inward. Thus there is in feminine beauty an aspect of the cosmic dance—at once in the sense of manifestation and in that of reintegration<sup>53</sup>—that directly relates to the metaphysical foundations of femininity, whence the fact—often poorly understood by modern mentalities cut off from a true metaphysics of sexuality—that man can contemplate woman as spectacle or apparition without reducing the latter to the status of pure object or idol. Contemplating woman and her dance of beauty, man is fascinated by the exterior-

ization of what is most profound in himself.<sup>54</sup> Woman is like the springing forth of the liberty that he bears in his heart. He is, as Titus Burckhardt has marvelously suggested, “actively passive” whereas woman is “passively active.” In contrast to the contemplation of woman by man, the contemplation of man by woman is more unequivocal and less plastic in the sense that it corresponds rather to a principle of concentration, unification, and of an ontological foundation. The geometric and generously rigorous or combative character of the masculine body evokes rather the idea of an order and of a centered strength, and it does so in a manner at once more exclusive and more dry. As Schuon put it in a metaphysically suggestive way, this loving contemplation of man by woman is akin to Liberty in search of Necessity. The contemplation of man is thus necessarily less directly linked to the outward projection of the latter; according to an Arab proverb, “the intelligence of woman is in her beauty and the beauty of man in his intelligence,” in the sense that feminine beauty implies a spiritual, psychic, and physical totality which makes the inward and the outward almost indissociable. To say that woman is beauty thus does not amount only to expressing the subjective and partial viewpoint of man, as one might think in considering only the psychological and social surface of things; it is also and especially to enunciate the at once manifesting and unifying character of totality that constitutes the essence of beauty and that of femininity.

If sapiential intelligence is the directing principle of Schuon’s work, beauty is its main mode of manifestation and assimilation. Beauty is the language of Truth as the Word is the language of Being. It pervades the entire spiritual universe that Schuon outlines in his books. In Schuon’s spiritual anthropology, man realizes his fundamental nature on the three planes of intelligence, will, and soul as the faculty of love. These three levels correspond to or are reflections of the Divine Wisdom, Power and Beatitude, that are, in Schuon’s metaphysics, the three dimensions of the Divine Order. The mystery of Beauty pertains more particularly, as we have seen, to the third of these Divine modes, and the third of these human planes. However, it could be said that there is a beauty of intelligence and a beauty of the will. The beauty of intelligence is its objectivity, that is, its adequacy toward Reality, which includes both discernment and contemplative intuition, the two being manifested in the sense of proportions. The sense of proportions is perhaps the aspect of intelligence that participates the most directly in the domain of beauty. It evokes a sense of harmony, equilibrium, and synthesis—the ability to put everything in its right place—on the one hand and a contemplative sense for the mystery of things—the absence of all mental pretensions to exhaust or unveil Reality—on the other hand. On the plane of the will, we could say that beauty is liberty, a liberty that is both submission to Necessity and utter spontaneity by virtue of the Divine Liberty in which the human will may ultimately participate. Beauty is like an encounter between love and knowledge.



## Conclusion

Upon completion of his first reading of one of Schuon's works, a scholar spontaneously compared his perception of the author to that of an eagle who, after having majestically and repeatedly circled the sky, would come and land right before him, summoning him with piercing eyes to jump into the void of an abyss of unknowing. The imaginal relevance of this perception is striking. The eagle, who is akin to the symbolism of lightning, is undoubtedly the animal that evokes most directly the metaphysical vision that characterizes Schuon's opus. Schuon's Lakota name bears further witness to this intuition. His work, which Jean Borella has suggestively defined as circular in style, spans the vast expanses of the sky of metaphysics while inviting the reader, with a kind of rigorous mercy, to engage himself totally in a spiritual odyssey that a priori requires a leap of faith, this faith that is both a prefiguration and a consequence of intellection. As Schuon puts it himself: "One can spend a whole lifetime speculating on the suprasensorial and the transcendent, but all that matters is the 'leap into the void' which is the fixation of the spirit and soul in an unthinkable dimension of the Real."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, one can endlessly comment on the conceptual wealth of Schuon's work and spiritual perspective. What matters ultimately is to delve into the books themselves, time and time again, and to assimilate the virtually inexhaustible substance that they contain. As for all profoundly spiritual authors, reading Schuon requires a certain pace and a certain quality of attention. These texts need to be meditated and not only surveyed. In order to bear fruits, they also need to be used as a vademecum along one's inner journey. They will thus unveil new aspects of Reality as one progresses in one's assimilation of their teachings. Indeed, all that we could do *in fine* is precisely to invite our readers, should they be disposed and ready to do so, to undertake this intellectual and spiritual journey on their own.



## APPENDIX 1

### Frithjof Schuon

#### *General Considerations on Spiritual Functions*<sup>1</sup>

**T**he spiritual function par excellence, which is essentially one of transmission, that is, the function of Revealer, whose prototype is the Word (Logos), manifests itself, at the dawn of each new adaptation of the Primordial Tradition, not only by the great Revealer himself, but also by men who represent more particularly one aspect or another of the revealing function, therefore as many secondary functions of it. These secondary functions are determined as such by the cyclical conditions which, as a whole, will be the living ambience of the new Revelation; and just as a Revelation is an adaptation of the Primordial Revelation, these functions will be adaptations of the function of Revealer.

This function is incumbent on a man because of the presence in him of certain conditions that designate and predestine him for that function, either because these aptitudes qualify him to assume a more particularly determined function, or because they concern spiritual function without an epithet. We do not refer in this case to the outwardly visible traditional function that is conferred through a ritual investiture; on the contrary, the function referred to can only be, from our current standpoint, the expression of conditions, or one of the conditions, that must be fulfilled by the man on whom the spiritual function, in the deepest sense in which we understand it here, is incumbent. Indeed, the traditional function is ever present, in a continuous chain, since the origin of the Tradition, whereas the spiritual function in the deeper sense may withdraw in times of obscurity and may not be manifested outwardly, but may reappear at a propitious time on the terrestrial plane. In addition, such a function may manifest itself, according to circumstances, in several individuals as well as in one only, and in various forms, which shows that this matter does not lie on the same level as the traditional function, which is established by outward supports such



as rites. However, we must add that there exist traditional functions in the initiatic order that imply, by their very definition, the attribution of a spiritual function as understood in the deeper sense that we have just specified. In these cases, the difference between the purely spiritual function, the source of which is inward, and the traditional function, which is only a derivation or an indirect modality of the former and the source of which is relatively outward, appears very clearly. For example, the function of Shaykh, as a traditional function, is always manifested and exercised outwardly; but as a spiritual function in a profound and rigorous sense, it may remain nonmanifested, which means that it will then be as if withdrawn from the terrestrial plane, in spite of the presence of a Shaykh as a traditional necessity, while waiting for a new individual support that will allow the reappearance of this function. When such a support presents itself in an initiatic organization, the purely spiritual function reappears so to speak on the exterior level and is superimposed, in the individual who is designated, on his merely traditional quality of Shaykh: he is then a *Shaykh al-Barakah* who teaches out of inspiration, whereas in the merely traditional order, a Shaykh may be only a *Khalfat al-Khulafâ* and give only secondhand teachings.

Since we have spoken about times of obscurity that prevent the manifested presence of a spiritual function, we must envisage an analogous fact that is a reflection of this situation. Indeed, when the entourage of a spiritual authority is not in conformity with his function, the manifestation of this function will be reduced to a minimum, which means that the function will be as if withdrawn within the heart of the individual who serves as a support for it, and this is an application of Christ's words: "Do not cast pearls before swine."

Spiritual functions are made manifest, at the origin, by the individuals who surround and assist the Founder of a Tradition, and these individuals, in conformity with their spiritual necessity, and therefore their traditional necessity, must remain present in some way until the end of the cycle. To say that they must remain "present" amounts to saying that they must be represented; Christ's words concerning the respective figures of Saint Peter and Saint John mark very clearly these two modes of presence, the first being outward in the sense that it depends upon a ritual investiture, and the second being inward because it pertains to a more profound and higher perspective and because it depends only in a relative fashion upon the outer conditions of the individual. Let us note, in this regard, that what we have just said about the second mode of presence implies no restriction as to the meaning that may be given to the words of Christ addressed to Saint John, concerning his particular person.

In order to envisage the question in another way, we can say that any man who plays an important spiritual role necessarily manifests a spiritual function, or in other terms, a "name" of which he has become the support or the representative, or one of the representatives.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we could say that every great spiritual figure is the manifestation, or a particular manifestation, of another great

spiritual figure who lived before him; this theory immediately results from the consideration of the various functions that are manifested at the beginning of the Tradition, functions to which one could not add any other, and in which spiritual Masters cannot but participate, given the very conditions of their respective natures. This theory goes actually even much further, and instead of stopping short at the consideration of the human manifestations of spiritual functions, it includes the entire traditional symbolism. So it is that, to mention just one example, the Maharshi of Tiruvannamalai is identified with Arunâchala, the sacred mountain on which he meditated for many years; and this mountain is itself symbolically identified with the sacred Mount Mêru, the primordial and central mountain. To go back to the more restricted application of the theory, it is possible to affirm that Meister Eckhart was a manifestation of Saint John, or, to give a different example, that Al-Hallâj was, within the framework of Islam, a manifestation of Christ.

This last example calls for an extension of the theory of spiritual functions, or rather of their modes of presence: for one could object that Christ, being one of the great Revealers, represented the Word or the spiritual function par excellence and not only an aspect of it, a difference that is referred to, in Islamic language, by the terms *Rasûl* and *Nabî*, referring respectively to the function of the Word and to the secondary functions that derive from it. However, this objection does not take into account the fact that each of the great Revealers (*Rasûl*) distinguishes himself from others by the necessary and unavoidable preeminence of a particular aspect of the function of the Word; in other words, it is through his aspect of *Nabî* that a *Rasûl* is distinguished from another, if one may express oneself in this way. What may be said simultaneously about the various spiritual functions, is to be manifested successively among the direct representatives of the supreme function, so that each great Revealer is like the manifestation of a particular function of the divine Word.

What we have said about the conditions necessary for the reception of a function—a reception that is a true investiture from inside or from above—can be applied in reverse to those whom the Islamic Tradition designates by the term *awliyâ-ash-Shaytân* (the saints of Satan). One must say, therefore, here again, that the presence in a given individual of certain conditions that constitute a genuine predisposition to satanic initiation,—that is to say, in other words, to counter-initiation—lead automatically to an exploitation on the part of the forces of darkness, and this allows one to understand that the so-called neutral character that the profane world affects to attribute to itself is perfectly nonexistent. Let one remember, in this respect, Christ's words, "Whoever is not with Me is against Me."



## APPENDIX 2

### Frithjof Schuon

#### *Christian Gnosis*<sup>1</sup>

Christianity is that “God made Himself what we are, in order to make us what He is” (St. Irenaeus); it is that Heaven became earth, so that earth might become Heaven. Christ retraces in the outward and historical world what has taken place, from the beginning of time, in the inward world of the soul. In man, the Pure Spirit becomes ego, in order that the ego may become Pure Spirit; the Spirit or Intellect (*Intellectus*, not *mens* or *ratio*) becomes ego by incarnating Itself in the mind in the form of intellection, or truth, and the ego becomes Spirit or Intellect by uniting with it. Christianity is thus a doctrine of union, or the doctrine of union: the Principle unites with manifestation, so that manifestation can unite with the Principle; whence the symbolism of love and the predominance of the bhaktic way. God became man “because of His immense love” (St. Irenaeus), and man must unite with God also by love, whatever be the meaning—volitive, emotive, or intellectual—that one may give to this term. God is Love: God—as Trinity—is Union, and desires Union.

Now, what is the content of the Spirit, or in other words, what is the message of Christ? For that which is the message of Christ is also, in our microcosm, the eternal content of the Intellect. This message or content is: love God with all thy faculties and, in function of this love, love thy neighbor as thyself; that is: unite—because “to love” means essentially “to unite”—with the Intellect and, in function of (and as a condition of) this union, abandon all egocentrism and discern the Intellect, the Spirit, the Divine Self, in all things. “Whatsoever ye have done unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.”

This message, or this innate truth, of the Spirit prefigures the cross, because here there are two dimensions, one vertical and the other horizontal, namely love of God and love of one’s neighbor, or Union with the Spirit and union with

one's ambience, envisaged as a manifestation of the Spirit. From a somewhat different point of view, these two dimensions are represented respectively by Knowledge and Love: one knows God and one loves one's neighbor, or again: one loves God by knowing Him, and one knows one's neighbor by loving him. But the deepest meaning of Christ's message, or of the truth connatural with the Intellect, is that manifestation is not other than the Principle; this is the message of the Principle to manifestation.

In practice, the whole question is to know how to unite with the Logos or the Intellect. The central means is prayer, the quintessence of which is objectively the Name of God and subjectively concentration, whence the obligation to invoke God with fervor. But this prayer, this union of our whole being with its principle or divine source, would remain illusory without a certain union with our totality, our universal neighbor, of which we are, as it were, a fragment; the scission between man and God cannot be abolished without the scission between me and the other being abolished also; we cannot recognize that God is within us, without seeing that He is in others, and in what manner He is in them. Manifestation must unite with the Principle, and, on the plane of manifestation and in function of this vertical union, the part must unite with the whole.

Inwardly, if we wish to understand that the intelligent soul is essentially—not in its accidentality—Intellect or Spirit, we must also understand that the ego, including the body, is essentially a manifestation of the Intellect or the Self. If we wish to understand that the world is false, Brahma is true, we must also understand that all things are *Âtmâ*. This is the deepest meaning of love of one's neighbor.

The sufferings of Christ are the sufferings of the Intellect in the midst of passions. The crown of thorns is individualism, or pride; the cross is the forgetting or rejection of the Spirit and, along with it, Truth. The Virgin is the soul in submission to the Spirit and united with it.

The very form of Christ's teaching is explained by the fact that Christ addressed his message to all men, from the first to the last; he therefore could not give his message a mode of expression which would be unintelligible to some intelligences, and ineffective or even harmful for them. Shankara could teach pure gnosis because he did not address all, and he could refrain from addressing all because the Hindu tradition already existed and included a priori spiritual ways adapted to modest intelligences and passionate temperaments. But Christ, as the founder of a spiritual and social universe, had of necessity to address all.

If it is wrong to reproach Christ for not having explicitly taught pure gnosis—which in fact he did teach by his very coming, and by his person, his gestures and his miracles, it is equally wrong to deny the gnostic meaning of his message, and thus to deny to intellectual contemplatives—who are centered on metaphysical truth and pure contemplation, or on pure and direct Intelligence—any right to existence, and to offer them no spiritual way in conformity with

their nature and vocation. This is contrary to the parable of the talents, and to the saying that “in my Father’s house are many mansions.”

The whole of Christianity is expressed in the trinitarian doctrine, and this essentially represents a perspective of union; it already envisages union *in divinis*: God prefigures in his very nature the relationships between himself and the world, relationships which are external only in illusory mode.

“The Light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not”: the truth of these words has been manifested—and is still manifested—within Christianity, by the misunderstanding and rejection of gnosis. And this explains in part the destiny of the Western world.



# Notes

## INTRODUCTION

1. *From the Divine to the Human*, (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1990), 1.

## CHAPTER 1. A BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

1. In order to complete this biographical study we have gathered and classified hundreds of letters and unpublished doctrinal writings or articles, for which we often had to obtain a translation from the German originals. The important correspondence exchanged between the young Schuon and his friends, often handwritten in Gothic script, has allowed us, for example, to reconstruct his psychological and spiritual itinerary. A close examination of his unpublished memories, *Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen (Memories and Meditations)*, collected in 1973 and translated into English, has also provided us with a substantial basis for our work. In addition, a detailed reading of his correspondence with René Guénon (about eighty letters received from the latter), until now completely unpublished and unexplored, has allowed us to gain insight into the exact nature of the relationship between the two metaphysicians. When necessary, we have compared our various sources and verified a few questions of detail. For example, we have verified Schuon's hour of birth on his birth certificate, a point that he recounts in his memoirs in the following way: "I was born five minutes before midnight, and at that very instant lightning struck the hospital where I was born, for there was a thunderstorm over the city. And all the clocks in the hospital stopped at that selfsame moment. Thus I have now recounted the event, as was requested of me. And I cannot help thinking of those lines which I



- wrote many years later, without having in the least thought of the incident just mentioned: 'Lightning am I, and my word is wine; the world lies deep within my heart's own beat.'" (*Memories and Meditations*, unpublished data).
2. His full name was Fred Frithjof Schuon. Etymologically, "Frithjof" means "the one who disturbs the peace." This makes one think of Gustave Thibon's words: "The saints are disturbers. Was not Christ an object of scandal for the Pharisees?" Schuon preferred to say that "Frithjof" meant that his function consisted in removing "false peace" and false certainties, in order to restore "true peace," which was symbolized by his name "Alfred" (from which was derived "Fred"), which means "all-peace."
  3. At the time of writing this letter, he had just demonstrated—from an esoteric point of view and with an amazing knowledge of the original texts—the intrinsic value of Evangelicalism. See *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1985), chapter entitled "The Question of Evangelicalism." He returned to this theme in *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1989), chapter entitled "Christian Divergences."
  4. He could already draw very well when he was seven years old, and when his mother questioned him about the nature of the faces of people of all races which he drew without a model, he replied as if he could see them: "Ich muß das nur nachzeichnen" (I only have to copy them).
  5. See *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1993), 8.
  6. *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Bedfont, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1987), 210.
  7. Born in Berlin in 1899 of a German father and an English mother, Lucy von Dechend was a friend of the Schuon family. She remained permanently attached to Frithjof Schuon, whom she first knew when he was a small child.
  8. When he was twenty years old, he became a Trappist monk and entered the Abbey of Notre Dame de Scourmont in Belgium, where he lived until his death in 1991. He was an unusual monk, a fervent admirer of the Plains Indians, with whom he kept up a serious and sustained correspondence.
  9. *Memories and Meditations*, 38. This passage refers to a famous altar painting by Martin Schöngauer (1473) in a church in Colmar, near Mulhouse.
  10. Guénon had embarked for Egypt on March 5, 1930, and had settled there. Like Schuon, he was at that time living in extreme poverty.
  11. He was engaged in writing what was to become his first book, *Leitgedanken zur Urbesinnung* (Guiding Thoughts for Meditation on the Real). This was published by Orell Füssli Verlag in Basel in 1935. It was reprinted in 1989 as *Urbesinnung: Das Denken des Eigentlichen* (Meditation: Thinking on the Real) by Aurum Verlag, Freiburg-im-Breisgau.

12. This was Seyyed Hassan Imâmî, a descendant of the Prophet as his title (Seyyed, "Lord") indicates. Later he became a mufti in Teheran. It seems in fact that Schuon had taken the decision to become a Moslem in Paris shortly before this, but his entry into Islam was not effective until he went to Mostaghanem.
13. On the evidence of Lucy von Dechend.
14. In 1926, he had been invited to give the first sermon and lead the first prayer at the inauguration of the Paris mosque. See also *A Sufi Saint of the 20th Century* by Martin Lings (London: Allen & Unwin; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).
15. Frithjof Schuon, "Râhimahu 'Llâh" in *Cahiers du Sud*, August-September 1935.
16. He was to receive the traditional name of 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn (Jesus, Light of Religion).
17. A letter found in the archives of Lucy von Dechend. She was later, for a time, secretary to Titus Burckhardt.
18. In a letter to Guénon of March 14, 1933, Schuon wrote, "During my stay in Mostaghanem, I was treated with extreme ill will by the civil authorities, and since this aggressive antipathy extended as far as the person of the Shaykh, who was even summoned to Oran to justify my presence in the *zâwiyah*, I thought it best to return to France, while waiting to do better, *inshâ'a 'Llâh*. I thought I was dreaming when I heard the interrogations to which I was several times subjected, and those that the Shaykh's *muqaddam* had to endure were no better; it was always the same mixture of gross indiscretion, political suspicion, and perfidy."
19. According to the evidence of the then editor-in-chief, Marcel Clavelle, alias Jean Reyor, in his *Document confidentiel inédit* (Unpublished confidential document).
20. "L'Oeil du Coeur" (The Eye of the Heart), November 1933; "Fâtiha et Shahâda," December 1933; "Ad-Dîn," March 1936, etc. In January 1935, he put together several of his articles, along with some photographs taken by Titus Burckhardt in Morocco, in a forty-page booklet entitled *De quelques aspects de l'Islam* (Some Aspects of Islam), which was published in Paris by Chacornac, and dedicated to Akhî Ibrâhîm 'Izz ad-Dîn ad-Darqâwî (To my brother Ibrâhîm 'Izz ad-Dîn ad-Darqâwî [Titus Burckhardt]).
21. In Islam, which presents itself as the primordial religion (*dîn al-fitrah*), each man is his own priest. Schuon, like Guénon, could obviously not have given full expression to his universalist message had he remained Christian.
22. This symbolical convergence between the Bhagavad-Gîtâ and the Divine Name Allâh, reminds us of the Gospel words: "The Spirit bloweth where it listeth."

23. In the special number of *Le Voile d'Isis* devoted to the Islamic tradition which appeared a short time later (August-September 1934), Schuon—who occupies a preponderant place in it, since it contains three articles of his along with a translation and commentary of a famous poem of Ibn 'Arabî—contributed a short obituary which he signed 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn al-'Alawî, in which, speaking of the Shaykh Al-'Alawî, he says, "Those who knew him are aware of the exceptional degree to which he realized within himself Islamic spirituality." Referring to the question of the date, Guénon wrote to Schuon at this time, "There is something truly strange in the coincidence between the date of the Shaykh's death and that of your experience regarding the *Ism* [the Name of God, written in Arabic in the letter]; this certainly cannot be fortuitous . . ."
24. This book has never been translated into French or English. The first of its component sections (called "books") was written in Besançon and Paris, the second in the Monastery of Notre-Dame de Scourmont in Belgium, the third in Basel, and the fourth and last, dedicated to the Shaykh Al-'Alawî, in Mostaghanem.
25. Jacques-Albert Cuttat, "Un livre de Frithjof Schuon," *Le Voile d'Isis*, no. 191, 1935. We may note in passing that in the June 1934 number of *Le Voile d'Isis*, Schuon drew attention to translations of some German mystical texts that had been published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*: "These translations are all the more valuable in that the German mystics, or those who are called such, are almost unknown in France." Schuon's profound affinity with the mode of thinking of Eckhart and Tauler must not be underestimated, just as the similarity of certain characteristics of his temperament to those of Johannes Scheffler (Angelus Silesius) cannot be ignored. It is doubtless legitimate to speak of a certain line of descent or at least of a kinship of inspiration, and of a common taste for a thought which is taken to the extreme.
26. This probably explains why, despite Schuon's future aloofness, Shaykh Adda never removed this function from him, which he had the right to do. Speaking of this supposed solicitation of a function, Schuon wrote in 1987, "This is not to know me, particularly as no respectable man lowers himself to beg for a dignity." Moreover, in the letters of the period, no trace is to be seen of any ambition of this sort. On the contrary, it is probable that Shaykh Adda had the secret hope of making of Schuon a Moslem missionary, as the photographs and articles which appeared in the Algerian newspapers of the period would suggest.
27. Octave Depont and Xavier Coppolani, in their voluminous reference work devoted to Moslem religious brotherhoods state, "These titles or licences are recorded on diplomas (*ijâzât*) which are drawn up with scrupulous care." *Les Confréries religieuses musulmanes* (Algiers: Adolphe Jourdan, 1897).

28. From a French translation by Michel Vâlsan.
29. Letter of April 1976 to Jean-Pierre Laurant, author of *Le sens caché dans l'oeuvre de René Guénon* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'Homme, 1975).
30. Cf. Jean-Louis Michon, "Hommage à Leo Schaya" in *Connaissance des Religions*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1986).
31. In his article "Considérations générales sur les fonctions spirituelles" (*Études Traditionnelles*, November-December 1939), Schuon, speaking of investiture "from within" or "from on high," replied indirectly to a question that had been asked. In fact Guénon inspired this text and even annotated the manuscript. See Appendix 1.
32. He dedicated several of his early German poems to "Sulamith."
33. In 1954, Titus Burckhardt felt it necessary to clarify this point in a letter to the Shaykh Al-Mahdî, the successor to Shaykh Adda: "God may create among the disciples of Shaykh Ahmad Al-'Alawî . . . as many *murshidîn* as he wishes. In the same way he can give the *faqîr* a *maqâm* which makes him independent of the successor of his own Master. As you are aware, venerable Shaykh, Shaykh 'Îsâ was initiated into the *tarîqah* by Shaykh Ahmad ibn 'Aliwâ; after the death of his Shaykh, he returned to Mostaghanem to submit to the rule of the *tarîqah*, and receive the teachings of your venerable father; the latter did not require Sidi 'Îsâ to renew his initiatic pact with him. This was indeed the rule amongst the Sufis of past centuries. You doubtless know the case of Mulay al-'Arabî ad-Darqâwî, who sent away the disciples of his disciples if they wanted to ask him questions: 'Go and ask your own master,' he would tell them."
34. Letter to Jean-Pierre Laurant, April 1976.
35. Frithjof Schuon, "René Guénon: Definitions" in *Sophia*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Winter 1995).
36. According to Ibn 'Arabî, this "gustatory" knowledge in spirituality is the reason why Al-Khidr and Moses, archetypal representatives of esoterism and exoterism respectively, did not initially understand one another. See note 79, p. 162.
37. Previously Guénon had always written "Cher Monsieur." Afterward, and right up to his last letter shortly before his death, he unfailingly addressed Schuon as "Most Excellent Shaykh and Beloved Brother."
38. *Memories and Meditations*, 142.
39. See "René Guénon" by Martin Lings in *Sophia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Summer 1995).
40. A year or two after his arrival, John Levy met a guru called Krishna Menon whose disciple he became with the name of Pramânanda Nath, rejecting Guénon, Schuon, and Islam. A few years later, Levy came to see Schuon in Lausanne and brought him the book by his master *Âtmâ-Darshan* which contradicted Guénon's views on Hinduism. After reading it, Schuon wrote

Krishna Menon a long letter of doctrinal clarification in which he said, “René Guénon was the first European who dared to affirm in the West the superiority of the Hindu spirit over the modern Western spirit, and, in the name of Eastern spirituality and that of the ancient West, dared mercilessly to criticize modern civilization as it has developed for about the last four centuries. It is absurd to claim that an author of European and Christian origin, who has studied, in Sanskrit, the sacred Scriptures of India and the commentaries of Shri Shankara and other sages, and who alone in the West places Hindu wisdom above all philosophies, has understood nothing of this wisdom. Guénon wrote much in his life. He expounded all the fundamental data that it is necessary to know in the West in order to understand India” (undated data). For Schuon, the expression of the truth took precedence over any divergence. Moreover, he would not tolerate a cavalier attitude toward Guénon’s memory because, beyond all criticisms, he sincerely revered the person of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wâhid (René Guénon)—something that some of his detractors never understood. John Levy returned to England and wrote a book on the teachings of his master. In the early 1950s, a few of Schuon’s disciples approached the same guru, whose “so-called Hinduism” Guénon had criticized, and then left him. Several of Guénon’s articles at the time implicitly criticized the attitude or blindness of those who followed Krishna Menon. His letters also make frequent reference to this. A few years after his return to Europe, John Levy was the victim of a serious accident that left him paralyzed. He died a few years later.

41. February 17, 1940, unpublished data.
42. He was then financial counselor at the Romanian consulate.
43. *Khalwah* means “retreat,” but by extension it can also mean a cell reserved for prayer.
44. This chapter first appeared in 1953 as an article in *France-Asie* (Saigon). Schuon’s six themes of meditation are also expounded in the last chapter of *The Eye of the Heart* (1950; English translation 1997), and in the remarkable chapter, “The Mystery of the Prophetic Substance” in *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1989).
45. For example, in his treatise *Al-Qaul al-Ma’rûf*.
46. “Repetition is an illusion, for in reality our constantly repeated prayer is but one single prayer. Repetition is situated in time, but prayer itself—the Name of God—is in Eternity. Through repetition we, temporal creatures that we are, participate in the Timeless; we are temporal in our activity, and eternal in our heart. Repetition pertains to man, not to the Supreme Name; nor to the invocation, in so far as it emanates from God; man can and must participate in this divine ‘Once,’ but he must do it from the plane on which he himself is situated, whence the multiplicity of his prayer. When a man has understood this well, he finds in it a great consolation and a kind of lib-

- eration; whenever he reproaches himself for being worthless, and for having done nothing with regard to God, let him put himself in the presence of God through the sacrament of the Supreme Name. The meeting between the Name and the heart is everything; the Name in the heart, the heart in the Name" (letter to Hans Küry, January 17, 1981).
47. For there is no action without intention. These intentions take the form of so many "arguments" ("when, by means of numerous *arguments*, I had calmed my mind . . ." wrote Milarepa), which are aimed at combating the distractions that assail our centrifugal nature.
  48. He is also often referred to by his Sioux name, Hehaka Sapa.
  49. Terms he uses in the chapter "Red Indian Shamanism" in *Light on the Ancient Worlds*.
  50. *The Transcendent Unity of Religion* (Wheaton-Madras-London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1984), xxxiv.
  51. In a letter to Peter Townsend (unpublished and undated data).
  52. How can one imagine that God as such can be incarnated in a religious form that is not essentially esoteric? Christ expressed himself "in spirit and in truth" and disparaged the "prescriptions of men." These words are the very definition of esoterism.
  53. Although he had much difficulty in accepting the rectifications suggested by Marco Pallis (he said he was "exasperated" and declared that he did not want to change anything more on this subject) and wrote in October 1950, "It must be recognized that, on the question of Buddhism, it was impossible, before the work of Coomaraswamy, to say anything other than what I said about it, which in any case still remains true, if not for original Buddhism itself, at least for certain more recent schools: otherwise one would have to admit that it is not I who am wrong, but quite simply Shankarâchârya, to whose authority I have referred in this regard!" (letter to Frithjof Schuon, October 5, 1950).
  54. As he said to Lings and Clavelle. Unlike Guénon, Schuon had widely read and assimilated the Fathers, and also, among many others, the Rhineland mystics.
  55. Clavelle said that Guénon "exploded," but in the letters that Schuon and Guénon exchanged at that time the tone is one of courteous dialogue. Actually Schuon had already expressed his point of view to Guénon. But the latter no doubt considered that as long as nothing was published, this remained in the domain of discussion. In letters Guénon wrote to Schuon following the appearance of his article, particularly in November and December 1949, he expounded what would be the basis of a future article, "Christianity and Initiation," and if he seemed rather taken by surprise and sought new historical proofs to bolster his theory, there is no trace of aggressiveness to be seen, quite the contrary. For his part, Schuon, who regretted

the turn this incident had taken, manifestly tried to spare Guénon in his replies.

56. Schuon's second book, *The Eye of the Heart*, was published in November 1950 (English translation 1997). As a gesture of appeasement, he did not include in it the chapter "Christly Mysteries." Of this book, which consists of several articles from the 1930s, Jean Biès said that it is a fundamental book with which it is absolutely necessary for anyone interested in traditional doctrines to be familiar (from the journal *Question de*, no. 10).
57. Letter to Jean-Pierre Laurant, April 1976.
58. Playing on the etymology of his name, he flattered himself to some of his visitors that he was "the little key."
59. Such as Jean Robin, for example, in *René Guénon, Témoin de la Tradition* (Paris: Guy Trédaniel, 1978). In 1978, Schuon pointed out in a letter to Gaston Georgel, "Robin's book is full of errors and calumnies in regard to myself—a quite unnecessary luxury, it seems to me—and this must sometime be rectified; for example, I have never prescribed Taoist meditations for anyone; this is an invention pure and simple; I have never received an order from Guénon, and he never had any to give me; Guénon never broke off with me, and his last letter was perfectly amiable" (letter of October 24, 1978).
60. Schuon was not of course the only one concerned in this document.
61. Thus, for example, there is no trace in Schuon's public or private writings of any pretension to being considered as "the spiritual master for the West," as Clavelle and others after him dishonestly alleged. In fact this in no way corresponds to his psychology. It is also clear that any notion of proselytism was foreign to him. We are inclined to see in these insinuations the fanciful assumptions of Clavelle alone, so great was his aptitude for distorting things, to use Guénon's words. A closely related question is that of Schuon's relations with Freemasonry at the end of the 1940s. It is no secret that Schuon had little regard for Freemasonry, traditionalist or otherwise. Unlike Guénon, he always considered it very problematical, and did not like the nonreligious climate that predominated therein. It is therefore highly improbable that he ever had the idea of extending his authority in that domain, as has been alleged. Even though some masons, members of la Grande Triade lodge, including Yvan Cerf, the "Venerable of the Lodge," made an inquiry of Schuon, these relations remained purely epistolary. Indeed, on receiving this request, all that Schuon did, in agreement with Guénon, was to seek some clarifications from Clavelle, who, a mason himself, was extremely flattered by the request. Clavelle therefore wrote a few "notices" providing information about the members of la Grande Triade who seemed to him to be the "most interesting" (*dixit* Guénon) and sent a copy of these to Guénon. On reading these notes, Schuon agreed to receive G.,

- a simple apprentice, who in fact never turned up, because—and it was Guénon who later informed Schuon of this (in his letter of August 1, 1950)—he had in the meantime become very ill. The supposed attempt to take control got no further than this (see J.-B. Aymard, “La naissance de la loge ‘La Grande Triade’ dans la correspondance de René Guénon à Frithjof Schuon,” *Connaissance des Religions*, numéro spécial René Guénon, Paris: Dervy, 2002).
62. In his letter to Laurant, he wrote, “I wonder where, for the love of Heaven, you could have got your information from.”
  63. See J.-P. Laurant, “Une lettre de Frithjof Schuon” in *Dossier H Frithjof Schuon* (Lausanne: Les Éditions de l’Âge d’Homme, 2001).
  64. In his book, Jean-Pierre Laurant makes it clear that this permanent anxiety regarding evil remained with him until his death. If a letter was the least overdue or lost he was thrown into a panic.
  65. Neguib’s coup d’état against King Farouk was imminent.
  66. In a detailed letter sent in 1970 to René Guénon’s son, Ahmed (now deceased), Martin Lings clarified matters perfectly. It would nonetheless be too long here to detail all the recollections and perfectly logical arguments put forward at that time.
  67. Shortly before his death, Guénon received a letter from Vâlsan which he refused to open and which he handed over to the Countess Valentine de Saint Point. The great-great-niece of Lamartine, she had lived in Cairo since the 1920s and had known Guénon since his arrival. A prolix and capricious poetess in her youth (she read one of her *Poèmes d’orgueil* in a cage of lions), blessed with an impeccable figure (she posed for Rodin and was the inspiration of several poets), eccentric and feminist (she published some rather questionable manifestos in 1912), the first woman to cross the Atlantic by air, the organizer of dance performances for the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and the friend of Gabriele d’Annunzio, she had been converted to Islam in the 1920s under the name Ruhîyah and had become a militant Arab nationalist. She came under Guénon’s interiorizing influence and, in her old age, became an unconditional disciple of Schuon, whom she visited every year. She died in 1953 at the age of eighty-three.
  68. A visit to Cairo with his wife had been planned for April 1951 and in December 1950 he began several letters to Guénon (which he never finished) in which he sought to explain his refusal to make spirituality depend on long bookish studies, but rather on direct and concrete experience.
  69. Quran, XXII, 68 and 69, in Arabic in the text.
  70. More or less unconsciously, certain people wished to see in Schuon only an instrument of Guénon, whose sole latitude would have been to add a few spiritual or methodic touches to the master’s work and, secondarily, to write commentaries on Ibn ‘Arabî. The resentment they expressed, and still



express, when Schuon, distancing himself from certain of Guénon's assertions, did not confine himself to the role they sought to give him, was often caused by this.

71. "Some Criticisms" in *Dossier H René Guénon*.
72. Up to a point, one might say that in Guénon there is a perfume of the end of the nineteenth century, in his style of writing and in the form of his thought, and indeed even in some of the subjects he dealt with. He was a light shining in the darkness of positivism and occultism. Moreover, it is surely significant that he had defined and framed the main outlines of his work as early as 1910–1912, before the First World War, "that veritable wall against which the twilight of the 19th century crashed," to quote Schuon in *To Have a Center* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1990), 17. In comparison, Schuon's style of writing, and his form of thought, appear more timeless, more nuanced, less schematized, and perhaps for this very reason more relevant to the present day.
73. Nevertheless Schuon came to Paris with his wife and met Vâlsan's associates, who welcomed them at the entrance to their hotel with a bouquet of flowers.
74. Letter to Jean-Pierre Laurant, 1976.
75. On the appearance of this book, Paul Sérant—the author, in 1953, of the first book on René Guénon and the brother of the traditionalist Catholic author Louis Salleron—published, in the March 1954 number of *La Parisienne*, an article entitled "René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon" in which he described the relationship between the works of the two major metaphysicians and, having examined where they diverged (something which he clearly perceived following his reading of Schuon's new book), concluded, "It must be recognized that Schuon does justice to certain aspects of Christian metaphysics, concerning which Guénon showed a rather surprising lack of understanding."
76. *Dominican Studies* (London), vol. 7 (1954): 260.
77. In the 1980s he explained, "If I like to paint women—celestial and earthly—it is because femininity incarnates *Rahmah* and *Haqīqah*; also *Barakah*, *Sakīnah*, *Lailā*; or again *Lakshmī*, *Shakti*, and ultimately *Ānanda*. There is no greater metaphysician than Shankarāchārya, and he wrote hymns to the Goddess" (letter to Harald von Meyenbourg, undated). In 1992, a large volume devoted to his paintings was published under the title *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Bloomington, Ind.: Abodes, 1992). In her "Memories and Anecdotes" (*Sacred Web* 8, 2001) Catherine Schuon mentions that this book includes about fifteen paintings, dated from 1988 on, which are not by Schuon himself but "by one of his pupils."
78. Extracts from letters quoted in the introduction to *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*.

79. In a letter dated August 15, 1954, he wrote, "Contemplating the Alhambra for hours, I understood better than ever how contemplative Islamic art is, in contrast with Gothic art, which is volitive, not to speak of Renaissance art, in which the volitive element becomes worldly, hypocritical, sensual, and arrogant. For Charles V, the Alhambra was worldly, because it is full of beauty and joy, and he set against this alleged worldliness the somber and crushing arrogance of his palace, which is devoid of any spiritual quality. Ugliness and stupidity try here to pass themselves off as virtues, namely austerity, rigor, detachment. The transcendent is envisaged in a purely volitive-negative manner, and not as a spiritual revelation in the midst of the world."
80. *Écrits*, "Le sage est celui qui en soi-même trouve sa propre plénitude." (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), 212.
81. *The Play of Masks* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1992), 31.
82. He is one of the five spiritual descendants of Shankarâchârya. Black Elk and the Jagadguru may be considered to represent symbolically two poles of the primordial religion.
83. Later recast as "His Holiness and the Medicine Man" in *The Feathered Sun* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1990).
84. We have seen above what Titus Burckhardt wrote at the time to the Shaykh Al-Mahdî regarding the filiation between the Shaykh Al-'Alawî and Schuon.
85. *Gnosis Divine Wisdom* (Bedford, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1959), 79.
86. See especially *Form and Substance in the Religions and Christianity/Islam*.
87. For example, the "Russian Pilgrim."
88. In 1967, at the request of the editor Jacques Masui, he contributed an article on "The Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master" to a collective volume published by Hermès entitled *The Spiritual Master in the Great Traditions of East and West*, in which, in response to the question as to whether a master can extend his authority beyond the borders of a given religion, he replied, "This is a very precarious possibility because of the high degree of spirituality it requires of the master, and also because of the possible difficulty, for him, of verifying facts situated in a traditional world other than his own; in such a case, he will act as the vehicle of a foreign *baraka*, and this, precisely, presupposes a spirituality which has concretely transcended the world of forms; we say "concretely," for universalist verbiage is one thing and realization of the Essence is another." This article later became a chapter in *Logic and Transcendence* (London: Perennial Books, 1984), 223.
89. Some three years later, Henry Corbin published in the same collection *Terre Céleste et Corps de Résurrection*. In a dedication to Schuon, he wrote, "In the hope that our paths may cross again . . . in sincere homage." Even if, with his sharp sense of nuance, Schuon recognized that "Shiite exoterism is

penetrated by a flavor of quasi-esoterism of an emotional character" *Christianity/Islam* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1985), 198, he does not accept the Shiite claim to being the esoteric form of Islam, a thesis supported by Corbin: "It is aberrant to reduce Islamic esoterism to the imamology and gnoseology of the Shiites, as Corbin seeks to do, and to reduce metaphysics to an inspirationist exegesis, as if intellection—which is also suprarational—did not exist, or had no role to play" (*In the Face of the Absolute*, 174, note 1). On becoming aware of a note concerning Teilhard de Chardin in *Understanding Islam*, Corbin confided to Seyyed Hossein Nasr that he was going to quote this criticism in one of his articles. He added that this quotation would no doubt cost him his election to the Académie Française, for which he was at that time a candidate, adding with a smile that "life is too short for that." And this indeed is what happened: he quoted the note concerned, and his candidacy was dropped, without it being possible for us to know definitively if there was actually a cause-and-effect relationship.

90. *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1995), 4.
91. The theme of the "miracle of intelligence" or the "theophany of consciousness" is central in the work of Schuon.
92. The reference here is to the *maqâmât* (stations) of the Sufis.
93. "A Few Memories," unpublished data.
94. He kept a double diary during these travels: a detailed diary of his Indian encounters and impressions, and a "Sufi diary" in which he recorded the spiritual insights evoked by this journey to distant places. Shortly after his return to Europe, he wrote an article entitled "The Metaphysics of Virgin Nature" which was published in *Études Traditionnelles* and later became a chapter in *The Feathered Sun*.
95. A young English artist, a friend of Marco Pallis, who in his rather Japanese-like paintings was able to render, with much talent, the spiritual and symbolic ambience of the Native Americans of olden times.
96. August 11, 1959, *Memories and Meditations*.
97. The latest English-language edition has a preface by Annemarie Schimmel.
98. A term that, however, he did not yet use.
99. See Thomas E. Mails, *Fools Crow* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).
100. Port-Vendres (*Portus Veneris*, the port of Venus) lies on the Mediterranean coast between Perpignan and the border with Spain.
101. From his long cycle of German poems of the 1990s (vol. 22, LX).
102. There is a well-informed commentary on the Schuonian perspective in the last chapter, entitled "La Femme," in Jean Hani's book, *La Vierge Noire et le Mystère Marial* (The Black Virgin and the Marian Mystery) (Paris: Trédaniel, 1995).

103. *Lights on the Ancient Worlds* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1984), 137 and 143.
104. A testimony taken up again in Jean Biès, *Voies des Sages* (Ways of the Sages), (Paris: Lebaud, 1996).
105. *Memories and Meditations*, 85.
106. Cf. Leo Schaya, "The Mission of Elias" (*Studies in Comparative Religion*, London, Summer-Autumn 1980). This text was first given as a lecture at the Houston Colloquium in 1973.
107. The "scandalous" companion whose acts and gestures Moses, the incarnation of the exoteric Law, did not understand. Schuon writes, "We can compare the particular mode of inspiration and orthodoxy that is esoterism to the rain which falls vertically from the sky, whereas the river—the outward tradition—flows horizontally, and in a continuous movement; in other words, tradition gushes forth from a spring, it is identified with a given founder of religion, whereas esoterism refers, above all and a priori, to an invisible filiation, represented in the Bible by Melchizedech, Solomon, and Elias, and associated in Sufism with al-Khidr, the mysterious immortal" (*In the Face of the Absolute*, 234).
108. According to Ibn 'Arabî (who refers to a *hadîth* transmitted by Ibn Abbâs) in "Les Catégories de l'Initiation" (The Categories of Initiation), a partial translation of the *Futûhât* by Abdul-Hâdi, in *Études Traditionnelles*, February 1936.
109. Ibn 'Arabî, *Les Illuminations de la Mecque* (The Meccan Illuminations), texts edited and translated under the direction of Michel Chodkiewicz (collection *Spiritualités Vivantes*, Albin Michel, 1997). We particularly recommend chapters 73 and 161 (*De la Proximité*) and the corresponding introductions by Denis Gril. See also the article by M. Chodkiewicz, "Les Malâmatîya dans la Doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabî" in *Melâmis-Bayrâmis: Etudes sur trois mouvements mystiques musulmans* (Istanbul: Editions Isis, 1998).
110. Extract from a letter of March 23, 1983.
111. Celestial name of the Prophet Muhammad, but also the name of the Shaykh al-'Alawî.
112. "Frithjof Schuon ou la Sainteté de l'Intelligence (the Sanctity of the Intelligence)" in *Religion of the Heart* (Washington, D.C.: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1991).
113. In *Understanding Islam* Schuon has written, "Tradition is not a childish and outmoded mythology but a science which is terribly real" (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books), ix.
114. Luc Benoist, "L'Oeuvre de Frithjof Schuon," in *Études Traditionnelles* (July-August-September 1978).
115. In an article on "true gnosis" (*Krisis*, December 1989), Jean Borella observed that in our time, it was Schuon, even more than Guénon, who had rid essential gnosis from any dispersion into the occult.

116. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Bedfont, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1981), 31–32.
117. In a private text in the 1990s, Schuon said once again: “In practice, the spiritual way needs a traditional framework. . . . By submitting to a revealed Law, man benefits from the protection of Heaven, and enjoys all sorts of spiritual supports, as well as a climate of goodness and beauty” (unpublished and undated data).
118. Schuon wrote several very instructive letters on this matter to Michel Chodkiewicz, who at that time was the director of the well-known Parisian publishing firm Le Seuil.
119. Jean Canteins, “*Christianisme/Islam*, Livre Jubilaire” in *Études Traditionnelles* (July-August-September 1982).
120. Perhaps the interest shown by several American academics in his work also had some importance. The Houston Colloquium in 1973, the publication in 1974 of *The Sword of Gnosis*, a composite volume edited by Professor Jacob Needleman of San Francisco, and the emergence of the perennialist current in certain American universities—taken up in France from 1990 to 1991 by the journal *Ariès* (see no. 11, 12–13, 14 and more particularly, “Listening More Closely to Schuon: A Response by Professor Cutsinger”)—may also have strengthened Schuon’s intention. From another point of view, it seems that Schuon felt at that time an imperious inner call to depart for the Far West, on the other side of the ocean, which Shaikh Hassan of Chaouen had evoked without naming it many years before. At that moment, Schuon was even disposed to go to Canada or Mexico, if the United States had not accepted him.
121. But contrary to what has been written, there is no Indian reservation in the region of Bloomington!
122. “Serenity, for this very reason, is not only an elevation, but also an expansion (*inshirâh*, “dilation [of the breast]”)” that is often mentioned in the Quran, which contains a *sura* bearing this title.
123. “Concerning Our Perspective,” undated and unpublished data.
124. 1992, untitled and unpublished data.
125. The first part of the second book contains a remarkable synthesis of several major Schuonian themes, especially the relationship *Atmâ-Mâyâ*, and the metaphysical resolution of the problem of evil.
126. Untitled and undated copy of a book review.
127. Explaining thereby the sudden profusion of unilaterally overtalented individuals, a phenomenon that might have caused one to believe in a meaningful progress on the part of humanity.
128. A few years earlier, he had written to J. P. Laurant, “If I sometimes express myself in a somewhat abrupt manner, it is in order to be simple and clear. I detest squabbling as much as I love the truth.” But in another letter he also

- said, "The tone of my criticisms corresponds adequately and spontaneously to the gravity of the things criticized" (letter to J. B., March 15, 1985.)
129. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* (Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1986). This work is a remarkable synthesis of Schuon's thought. It would also be useful to consult the collection of essays entitled *Religion of the Heart* (Oakton, Virginia: Foundation for Traditional Studies, 1987) that was presented to Schuon on his eightieth birthday, which also contains a valuable and exhaustive bibliography (up to 1991) of Frithjof Schuon's publications, and translations of them in several languages.
  130. *Racines de la condition humaine* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1990).
  131. *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 2002), 110.
  132. In *The Herald Times* of November 26, 1991, there was an editorial hailing the prosecutor's decision and calling the legal action "unfair," "unprofessional," and "a circus" and asking, "Where was the prosecutor while Schuon's reputation was being soiled by the charges brought against him?," the editorial added, "To his credit, he did not shy from responsibilities; 'A mistake was made by my office and I'm responsible' he said last week. 'I tried to correct it as soon as I could, and, hopefully, we will learn from it.' Whatever lessons are learned will be a little late for Schuon, an aging philosopher of international renown whose personal reputation has been so publicly called into question." See also Michael Fitzgerald, "Frithjof Schuon: Providence without Paradox," in *Sacred Web* 8 (2001).
  133. Padre Pio and, in a different context, but arising from similar causes, St. Theresa of Ávila, who was accused before a tribunal of the Inquisition by one of her former nuns for alleged maltreatment and suspect practices.
  134. See David Godman's excellent book *Annamalai Swami, une vie auprès de Ramana Maharshi* (Falicon, France: Nataraj, 1996).
  135. See also *Candide au pays des Gourous* (Candide in the Land of the Gurus) by Daniel Roumanoff (Paris: Dervy, 1990).
  136. *Treasures of Buddhism* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1993) is a collection of Schuon's writings on Buddhism.
  137. *The Play of Masks*, 20.
  138. *The Play of Masks*, 85.
  139. *The Play of Masks*, 44.
  140. *The Play of Masks*, 53.
  141. *The Play of Masks*, 53.
  142. In *The Play of Masks*, following the precedent of Hinduism, Schuon explains that the human body, the *Imago Dei*, "invites to adoration by its very theomorphic form, and that is why it can be the vehicle of a celestial presence that in principle is salvific; but as Plato suggests, this presence is accessible only to the contemplative soul and not dominated by passion. *The Play of*

- Masks* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1992), 89. Schuon often emphasized the importance, in his spiritual method, of the “interiorizing alchemy of esthetic impressions” and insisted on the need for an ambience and environment that are in harmony with the spiritual path. This is why he strongly recommended that one should surround oneself with beautiful objects—particularly items of Japanese and Moroccan craftsmanship—because they are imbued with a sober beauty.
143. Some poems in English by Schuon, under the title of *Road to the Heart*, were published in 1997, and four little books of his German poems entitled *Glück, Leben, Sinn* and *Liebe* (Happiness, Life, Meaning, and Love) were published in 1997 by Herder Verlag of Freiburg-im-Breisgau. Much earlier, in 1947, Urs Graf Verlag of Zurich, a company directed by Titus Burckhardt, published two collections of German poems entitled *Sulamith* and *Tage-und Nächtebuch*.
144. To quote the words of Joë Bousquet, “One could thus say of poetry that in it man gives voice to his essence” quoted by Louis Aragon, *Les Yeux d'Elsa* (Paris: Seghers, 1995), 147–148. In an extract included in *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom*, Schuon writes, “Mental beauty—poetry—is to active bodily beauty—dance—what essence is to form. In other words, there is an affinity between mental and auditive beauty—poetry and music—on one hand, and between active bodily beauty and visual beauty—dance and beautiful form—on the other. . . . Beauty perceived in the outward must become, within ourselves, archetypal and interiorizing music.”
145. Gustave Thibon, *Au soir de ma vie* (Paris: Plon, 1993).

## CHAPTER 2. A SPIRITUAL PORTRAIT

1. “Notes on the Light of the Eastern religions,” *Dominican Studies*, vol. 7 (1954), 260.
2. *Al-Bâtin*, “The Hidden,” “The Inner,” is one of the divine names. This expression, used by Schuon himself in a letter, quite justly describes his fundamentally contemplative nature. In *Dimensions of Islam* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 41, Schuon explains, “The way that corresponds to *Al-Bâtin* is that of the contemplative love of God and, at the summit, that of gnosis, of knowledge of the Self. But the thing that unites, humanly speaking, every intention or perspective is the warmth and freshness of devotion. Without it there is no happiness; living without devotion is a pretense of living; it is living in death.”
3. We know that some attach a negative, even pejorative connotation to this term. Yet, just as Schuon, we really mean by the term “mystical” “all inward contact (other than the purely mental) with realities that are directly or

indirectly Divine” *Logic and Transcendence*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 2, distinguishing it from “mysticism,” which refers rather to “sentimental abuses.” According to the traditional definition, coming from St. Dionysus the Areopagite, the mystical consists of “not only knowing divine things, but moreover of feeling them” (*Ou monon mathôn, alla kai pathôn ta theia*).

4. From a letter of 1928 we know that Schuon as a youth had written at least nine journals of which, unfortunately, only a few sparse excerpts remain.
5. *Memories and Meditations*, 33.
6. *Memories and Meditations*, 36.
7. *Memories and Meditations*, 30. This notion of “awaiting,” often repeated, is not without meaning. Pierre Hadot, in his remarkable *Plotinus, or the Simplicity of Vision*, translated by Michael Chase (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 56 notes that “Plotinian love has a feminine tonality, because it is first and foremost mystical. The soul ‘searches,’ ‘runs,’ and ‘leaps,’ just like the spouse of the *Song of Songs* in search of her Beloved. But it also waits like the great mystics (Mechtild, Teresa de Avila, Rose de Lima) who Rilke speaks of and who awaited no more than the infinite path. Thus the soul soars and at the same time it waits ‘as the eye awaits the rising sun,’ it waits for the Presence to manifest itself.”
8. *Memories and Meditations*, 37.
9. Letter of February 21, 1928, translated from German. In 1927 he even thought of becoming a Cistercian monk like his brother.
10. Letter of December 9, 1929, translated from German.
11. In *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, translated by William Stoddart (London: Perennial Books, 1981), 166.
12. Valentinus (d. 160) distinguishes three categories of men: the *hylics* or *somatics*, enclosed in the material world, the *psychics*, whose soul stays as if shared between heaven and earth, and the *pneumatics* (from the Greek *pneuma*, spirit), the only veritably spiritual beings because, by nature, they inwardly participate in truth and are attracted by it alone. In *Christianity/Islam*, translated by Gustavo Polit (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1985), 185, Schuon nuances this overly trenchant typology by specifying that the “three seeds” coexist in fact in every man even if one of them predominates over the others. He confirms this approach in *Sufism, Veil and Quintessence*, translated by William Stoddart (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1981), 87, saying, “The ‘pneumatic’ is the man in whom the sense of the sacred takes precedence over other tendencies.” In a footnote in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (166, note 73), Schuon circumscribes his use of the gnostic categories by noting, “Be that as it may, these gnostic terms are susceptible of different nuances, independently of the speculations of Valentinus.” It may be noted with Pierre Hadot that,



- although judged heretical, “the gnosticism of Valentinus represents the first Christian theology of the Trinity and . . . all the subsequent theological tradition tributary to it” (“Gnostiques” in *Encyclopedia Universalis*, 538). In a study on Berdiaev—after stating that “the differentiation between pneumatics and psychics proposed by gnosis is still valid”—Marie-Madeleine Davy emphasized that “Saint Paul mentioned the particular knowledge of the ‘pneumatics,’ the divine *pneuma* illuminating the human *pneuma*” before adding, by quoting the study *Création religieuse et pensée contemplative* (Religious Creation and Contemplative Thought) by Jean Baruzi, “A man who reaches the state of *pneumatikos* develops within that which will one day be for him the ‘spiritual body’ . . . Paul, and those who resemble him, attain a kind of new creation of their being” “Mystique et Gnose,” in *Nicolas Berdiaev, l’homme du huitième jour*, (Paris: Editions du Félin, 1991), 135–136.
13. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, p. 165. The same expression is to be found when he writes in an almost autobiographical way, in *Form and substance in the Religions*, that “the most contemplative child may be strongly attached to things which, in the human desert that might surround him, appear as memories of a paradise that is lost and at the same time immanent” (201).
  14. Note on René Guénon in *Cahier de l’Herne*, (Paris: L’Herne, 1985), 366–367. Ptolemy, the disciple of Valentinus, develops in his *Letter to Flora* a similar idea: “And just as gold keeps its beauty when in the blackest mud without being soiled by it, so the gnostic cannot submit to any stain nor lose his pneumatic essence, for the acts of this world are henceforth without effect on him.” Quoted by Jacques Lacarrière, *Les Gnostiques*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994), 98.
  15. *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedânta*, translated by Richard C. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1945), 76, note 1.
  16. Which rejoins Angelus Silesius’s formula: “An essential man is like eternity, who remains unchanged by all exteriority.” *Le pèlerin chérubinique* (Paris: Aubier, 1946), 121.
  17. *The Play of Masks* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1992), 31. It was also in this spirit that Schuon, who had a great admiration for Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, wrote to Titus Burkhardt that the saint “was, within the religious domain, an avataric manifestation; in her it was a manifestation where the spiritual is a priori and the earthly/human a posteriori. The a priorism of Thérèse is in the fact that she was a flower of adoration, not a searching person; this avataric nature was also manifested in phenomena accompanying her birth. . . .” (letter of November 2, 1943, translated from German).
  18. “The intellective way cannot subsist without the dynamic and subjective element provided by the personal will for actualization.” *Spiritual Perspec-*

- tives and Human Facts*, translated by Macleod Matheson (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), 147.
19. In the manner of the great mystics, he will pass through periods of annihilation and doubt concerning himself, but he will also know sublime flashes that many letters of his youth, especially from 1927 to 1932, allow us to glimpse. These doubts do not affect the intellectual certainty which is his as a gnostic, an *ʾarif bi-Llâh*, a knower by God, whereas “there is no doctrinal certitude that may come to the aid of the mystic; the certitude is his above all from grace and not from evidence by knowledge” (letter to Titus Burckhardt, January 20, 1944, translated from German). From another point of view, we must not underestimate the undeniable suffering, very present with him throughout his youth and particularly during 1932 until his departure for Mostaghanem, that accompanies the accession to knowledge. In this connection one will pick up the remark of Cioran in his preface to *Anthologie du portrait dans la littérature française*: “When Mâra, the god of the dead, tried, as much by temptations as by threats to pull the Empire of the World away from the Buddha, the latter, to confuse him and turn him away from his pretenses, said to him, among other things, ‘Have you suffered for knowledge?’” This question, continues Cioran, “which Mâra could not answer, one should always use when wanting to measure the exact quality of a spirit.” Quoted by Jean-François Revel, *Le Moine et le Philosophe*, (Paris: NiL editions, 1997), 367.
  20. Mark Perry calls to mind an image of Schuon as “a priest carrying a sacred object and who therefore advances slowly but firmly while holding himself erect.” In *Sophia*, vol. 6, no. 1, Summer 2000. Schuon seemed to be inhabited by a presence to which the intensity of his look, the intonations of his voice, or the natural, almost ritualized elegance of his gestures seemed to testify.
  21. “Pride consists in taking ourselves for what we are not and disparaging others. Self-respect (French *fierté*) is knowing what one is and not allowing oneself to be abased. Self-respect does not prevent a man from abasing himself before what surpasses him, but it is far from being the opposite of true humility, whatever the more superficial moralists may say on this score” (*Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1955).
  22. *Ibid.*, 193.
  23. Pierre Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 345. In the same vein, Père Le Saux said, “The Sage is he who finds his own plenitude in himself” *Ecrits*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), 224.
  24. Swami Abhisikatananda (Henri Le Saux), *Gnânânanda: Un maître spirituel du pays tamoul*, (Paris: Editions Présence, 1970), 83. Doubtless we must also recall here the ties of brotherhood that Schuon developed with American Indians, Indians of whom the “sacerdotal bearing” and the “combative and stoic heroism” had fascinated him when he was very young.

25. One cannot, indeed, fail to find in the microcosmic reflection which is the soul—made of will, intelligence, and sensitivity—a correspondence with the divine Self; the latter shows through still more clearly when one refers to an essentially pneumatic individuality.
26. *Logic and Transcendence*, (London: Perennial Books, 1975), 217.
27. In this we follow the terminology used many times in this respect by Henry Corbin in his writings on Sufism. The term *fedeli d'amore* is from Dante's *Vita Nuova*, and in Charles Eliot Norton's translation it is rendered as "liegemen of love." Corbin remarked about the *fedeli d'amore* that for them "a cult of love dedicated to a beautiful being is the necessary initiation to divine love, from which it is inseparable" *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabî*, translated by Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 100–101.
28. For example, he will regret that the second edition of Martin Lings' book on Shaykh al-'Alawî includes in its dedication an explicit homage to "Shaikh 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn Ahmad al-'Alawî," which was his traditional name and which he then wished to keep confidential.
29. No doubt one can again emphasize here that Schuon's ancestry and first culture were Germanic, and that his form of thought like his spiritual personality were, on more than one account, allied to those of the author of the *Cherubic Pilgrim* and of Meister Eckhart.
30. Beginning in 1965, as we shall see later.
31. In her article of tribute to Frithjof Schuon, precisely titled "Nûr ed-Dîn," Alida Martin remarkably well emphasized "the solar character of his thought": "In his works, the doctrinal exposition is often accompanied by a rigorous critique of the obfuscations of the modern mentality influenced by philosophical systems which he judged with a keen logic and an art, proper to him, of discerning errors while bringing them into the light of irrefutable evidence; as the light of day disperses the night-time ambiguity of forms and thus reveals their real shapes. One might characterize the very penetrating and masterful studies of doctrine in which the often poetic resonance of expression, the felicity of formulas like 'the metaphysical transparency of phenomena,' and the suggestive power of paradoxes like the 'supernaturally natural' or 'relatively absolute' are allied with the flashes of discernment capable of dissolving mental obscurities and antinomies to attain the luminous center of the highest metaphysical realities." Alida Martin, "Nûr ed-Dîn," *Connaissance des Religions*, Numéro Hors Série Frithjof Schuon, (1999), 113.
32. This name which was given to him by Shaykh Adda Ben Tounes in memory of Shaykh Ahmed al-'Alawî during his second stay in Mostaghanem, also recalls, as we shall see further, his mysterious meeting with a stranger to

- whom this name was attributed and in whom one can recognize the enigmatic immortal Khidr (*al-Khadir*), the “hidden master” of the solitaries (*Afrād*) spoken of in the Quran, in the *surah* of the Cave.
33. According to ‘Ā’ishah, the favorite wife of Muhammad, “The Messenger of God admired greenery, and beautiful faces filled him with wonder.” The love of virgin nature and human beauty, of the primordial sanctuary and of the *khalif* (representative) of God on earth, are the mark of the spiritual nobility of the “man-center.” Speaking of the Prophet’s polygamy, Schuon specified, “It is within this context that one must situate that feature of the Muhammadan substance which could be called ‘Solomonic’ or ‘Krishnaic,’ namely its spiritual capacity to find concretely in Woman all the aspects of the Divine Femininity, from immanent Mercy to the infinitude of universal Possibility. The sensory experience that produces in the ordinary man an inflation of the ego, actualizes in the ‘deified’ man an extinction in the Divine Self.” “The Mystery of the Prophetic Substance,” in *In the Face of the Absolute*, 221. The complexity of the relations between Muhammad and his wives is recounted well by Magali Morsy in her book *Les femmes du Prophète* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989).
  34. His *Book of Keys*, made up of over one thousand texts of one to three pages, is in itself, by its density and depth, a genuine monument of spiritual, esoteric, and methodic teaching.
  35. It is evidently only a question of a sketch or interpretative framework, and one must not forget the natural unity, quasi trinitarian, of the three dimensions of the ternary that always coexist simultaneously.
  36. “Auditive beauty is to visual beauty as essence is to form. Music is interiorized formal beauty as formal beauty is exteriorized music. Similarly, mental beauty—poetry—is to corporeal beauty in action—dance—as essence is to form. Thus there is an affinity between mental beauty and auditive beauty—poetry and music—on the one hand, and between corporeal beauty in action and visual beauty—dance and beautiful forms—on the other. The point here is the relationship between form and essence, or between manifestation and archetype, or between the outward and the inward. Outwardly perceived beauty must become, within us, archetypal and interiorizing music. We love that which we are in our essence, and we must be—or become—what we love, and what we have the right to love by the nature of things. This is the meaning of the beauties of divine creation and of sacred art.” *Echoes of Perennial Wisdom* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1992), 68.
  37. From this point of view one will recall, following André Padoux, the fact that Abhinavagupta and all Indian theorists of aesthetics had designated all beings gifted with aesthetic sensibility as “having a heart” (*sahridaya*):

- "They have a heart in the sense that they are capable of feeling beauty in themselves, to allow forms to be reflected in themselves, in the center of their being, thus in their heart—like a pure mirror . . . the profoundly felt experience of beauty opens into a contemplative state which scarcely differs from that of the mystic absorbed in God. Moreover it is often described by the same term, *camatkâra*, which is wonderment, ecstatic surprise." André Padoux, "La notion de cœur en Inde, du Védisme à l'Hindouisme," *Connaissance des Religions*, nos. 57–58–59 (January–September 1999), 226. Speaking of the "liberating passage" from Immanence to Transcendence, Schuon writes in *The Play of Masks*, "In a particularly direct way, music and dance are supports for a passage—at whatever degree—from the accident to the Substance; and this is above all the meaning of rhythm. The same is true of sacred nudity and all contemplative recourse to virgin Nature, the primordial sanctuary." From "The Liberating Passage," in *The Play of Masks*, 88, note 3.
38. "*Herbstlaub*" (Autumn Foliage) translated from German.
  39. Perhaps he also aspired, if one believes his first letter addressed to Cairo, to respond to the vow of Guénon, which called in *Orient et Occident* (*East and West*) for the "formation of an intellectual elite . . . nonexistent in the West" but still present in the East, and absolutely affirmed that if one found the "invariable inner direction" one would find oneself endowed with "an infallible compass and an impenetrable breastplate." *Orient et Occident*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Vega, 1964), 170. Though he never really adopted it, he soon abandoned this Manichean approach to the East-West relation which incidentally, he later held against Guénon.
  40. Note that it was precisely in October 1932, the date of Schuon's departure for Mostaghanem, that Guénon published his first article on initiation and, in January 1933, one entitled "Some Initiatic Centers," which would be followed in the succeeding months by several developments on the same theme, previews of his future *Aperçus sur l'Initiation* (Paris: Etudes Traditionnelles, 1946). In a letter sent from Mostaghanem at the end of November 1932, which is left to us in a rough draft, Schuon tells Guénon, "You have published in the October *Voile d'Isis* an article of major importance for us [he speaks for his European friends] on the conditions of Initiation."
  41. Letter to Benjamin Black Elk, October 7, 1947.
  42. According to members of the 'Alawî *tarîqah* at that time, two days before his death the Shaykh had, several times over, insistently called for his disciple 'Îsâ Nûr ad-Dîn.
  43. In this way, when Schuon was only twenty years old, a young Alsatian designer, Adolphe Hesseling, wrote to him, "It has been hardly five months since you wrote to me for the first time, which is really a short time. But since

- then, in my soul, many beautiful things have happened that make me very happy. In your last letter in particular, I felt the spiritual, the beautiful, the ineffable, the true and the noble. Your letters are for me a real guide in my spiritual life as well as the material and psychic; they are the only nourishment my soul receives from outside. You have awakened in me the Infinite, which, as you say, causes to waver with a calm smile many things of which I have become aware, and I hope it will make them not only waver but fall altogether. . . . It is only through knowing you that I have learned to listen to the Ineffable, and nowhere do I sense It and hear It better than in nature. . . . So I am no longer the same man . . . and I understand now that you feel so happy in the silent solitude of the forest. I don't know how to express my feelings as you do, but I think you know that all you write is of the greatest interest to me, and I am already looking forward to the next letter you have promised me" (letter of April 15, 1928, translated from German).
44. Even the ultra-Guénonian Charles-André Gilis admits that this was an "immense charge."
  45. "Vanity: fruit of the joining of nonbeing with pride. The etymology of the word (empty) and its meaning (pride) bear witness to this double origin. Vanity is the pride of the empty." Gustave Thibon, *L'ignorance étoilée*, (Paris: Fayard, 1974), 67.
  46. "The *guru* is the Self. The *guru* is at once external and internal. Externally, he gives a shock to the mind so that it may turn inward, as well as inwardly drawing the mind toward the Self, helping it to become calm. This is the *guru's* grace. There is no difference between God, the *guru* and the Self" (Ramana Maharshi).
  47. Although he had been able to write in his *Aperçus sur l'Initiation*, "To enter into the path is virtual initiation; to follow the path is the effective initiation" 203.
  48. *Logic and Transcendence*, 220.
  49. One day, for example, she would confess to him that she had heard resounding in her heart for some days the words *fedeli d'amore* and *Bismillâh al-Rahmân al-Rahîm* (in the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful), and declared to him that she could no longer live without him.
  50. As we shall see, one is tempted to think that he experienced the *Amor-Mors* duality: Love and Death, *Rahmah-Fanâ'*, divine Mercy and extinction of the ego.
  51. This is not simply a stylistic phrase: in his letters and poems of that time we find some emphases that irresistibly evoke the young Dante of the *Vita Nuova*: "*Amore e'l cor gentil sono una cosa*" (Love and the gentle heart are one thing ).
  52. Letter of October 14, 1941, translated from German.

53. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 138.
54. He distinguishes here three human types: the passionate, the sentimental and the intellectual. He also compares these types to the Sufi ternary: *makhâfah*, *mahabbah*, *ma'rifah* (fear, love, knowledge).
55. *Forme et substance dans les religions* (Paris: Dervy-Livres, 1975), 201.
56. One may incontestably say that his spiritual experience of December 27, 1942 marks a turning point in his life. Starting from this date, there was henceforth in him a strong feeling of certainty and an orientation toward pure gnosis.
57. In a report concerning the reedition of *Perspectives spirituelles et faits humains*, Jean Borella notes, however, that this written work "is like no other in all the spiritual literature" and that "it is advisable to be aware of this" and he adds, "[I]t is what makes for us its peculiar 'charisma': a unique alliance, with no equivalence to be found elsewhere, between a sort of inspiration which puts us as though directly in the divine presence, *unmittelbar zu Gott*, and a 'good sense,' a transcendent and powerfully synthetic logic that awakes the sleeping intellect within us" *Connaissance des Religions*, vol. 5, nos. 2–3 (September-December 1989). On reading his works, we indeed sometimes have a true feeling of anamnesis.
58. "La réforme de la mentalité moderne," *Regnabit*, June 1926. Translated as "The Reform of the Modern Mentality" in *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1996), 5.
59. In one of his first letters written from Mulhouse, when he was scarcely fourteen years old, he announced gravely to his friend Yoggi (nickname of Johann Jakob Jenny) that he envisaged "writing an epic Hindu poem."
60. Although in our sense, as we have already said, Guénon, a very unilateral metaphysician, may have sometimes been the victim of attitudes proper to his era—in *East and West*, for example—or of reflexes tainted by the occultism of his youth. However, it should not be forgotten, as Schuon wrote, that Guénon "had heroically crossed a bridge, and he was the first to cross it." In the same text, Schuon specified that the work of Guénon is "the radiation of pure principles: the presentation at once precise and profound of crucial ideas starting from indispensable truths. And for these keys we owe Guénon unfailing gratitude." *Études Traditionnelles* No. 486 (October-November 1984).
61. In more than one way his works can be considered as a clarification of metaphysics confronted with rationalism and Kantian criticism upon which modern philosophy is founded.
62. *Understanding Islam* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1998), viii.
63. *Gnosis, Divine Wisdom* (London: Perennial Books, 1978), 69.
64. An expression which he used in speaking of the "Shankarian miracle." *To Have a Center* (Bloomington, Ind.: , World Wisdom Books, 1990), 135.

65. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 33.
66. *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1990), 93.
67. *Etudes Traditionnelles*, no. 423 (January-February 1971).
68. "Quelques critiques," in *Dossier H René Guénon*.
69. Letter to Michel Valsân, October 9, 1960.
70. Guénon had never been conferred with an initiatic function.
71. "You have never known Shaykh Al-'Alawî and you cannot really know what he signifies to me. . . . I have twice received his imprint." Letter to Michel Valsân, October 9, 1960. This "twice" no doubt refers to his initiatic connection and to the actualization of the Divine Name on July 11, 1934. This attachment was not unilateral: an old *faqîr*, encountered in Morocco in 1967, still remembered Shaykh Al-'Alawî's affection for his European disciple. During the 1950s, Schuon attentively followed the elaboration of the very beautiful biography of Shaykh Al-'Alawî which his disciple, Martin Lings, was writing, and he contributed many suggestions and corrections.
72. We could, however, already add that his relation with the Virgin Mary is also linked to the *Ânanda* notion, as we shall see further on, and that this "esoteric god-parentage" is, in a way, a dual one.
73. Secondarily, it may be noted that Rûzbihân was a musician just as Schuon was an artist.
74. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, "Les Fidèles d'Amour" (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) 9–146 and Rûzbehân, *Le dévoilement des secrets*, foreword and translation by Paul Ballanfat (Paris: le Seuil, 1996); see also the beautiful *Le Traité de l'Esprit saint de Rûzbehân de Shîrâz*, foreword and translation by Stéphane Ruspoli (Paris: Cerf, 2001).
75. *Le dévoilement des secrets*, 14.
76. *Le dévoilement des secrets*, 15–16.
77. Rûzbihân knew perfectly well that he was only a *Nabî* and not a *Rasûl*. According to Henry Corbin "every sufi 'realising' the esoteric meaning of the religious law has the function of *nabî*, for the issue is the esoteric sense of Beauty," in Rûzbehân, *Le Jasmin des Fidèles d'Amour* (Lagrasse, France: Verdier, 1991) 85. In *In the Face of the Absolute*, Schuon gives the following definitions on the subject of the Prophet: "The titles *Rasûl*, 'Messenger,' refers to the quality of Activity and expresses the affirmation of the True and the Good; whereas the title *Nabî* (*ummi*), ('unlettered') 'Prophet,' refers to the quality of Passivity and expresses receptivity with regard to the heavenly Gift. The first function relates to 'duty,' and the second to 'qualification'" (232).
78. Marie-Madeleine Davy, *La Symbolique romane* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), quoted in Nicolas Berdiaev, *L'homme du huitième jour*, p. 134. This well-



- known medievalist had already stressed that “the concept of prophecy, as André Neher pointed out in his work on *L'Essence du prophétisme*, must be dissociated from that of anticipation.”
79. Al-Khidr, archetype of the “ever living spiritual master” close to Elijah, is the true representative of quintessential esoterism in the face of Moses, the lawmaker, in the Quranic *surah* XVIII. According to Sufi tradition, he is the master of the *Afrâd*, those who are the Isolated or Solitary in this world but near to God. As a “verdant” prophet he revivifies the souls of the elite and gives them birth within, to their secret (*sirr*). The Quran describes him as “one of Our servants on whom we have bestowed Mercy from Us and to whom we have conferred a Science that emanates from Us.” In a letter to Leo Schaya, Schuon noted that “El-Khidr is really the Holy Spirit; in this sense he is Mary’s spouse; he is also the human form of Metatron, and the Intellect that lives within us is his microcosmic manifestation. Elijah is a historic manifestation—but also suprahistoric—of this principle.” Letter of September 4, 1973, translated from German. In his book on the *Culte de la Vierge* François Chenique also stresses that “Metatron is the “*parèdre*” of *Shekinah* (the presence of God in his creation). . . . It is he who is responsible for theophanic missions, being the servant of the *Shekinah*” (Paris: Dervy, 2000), 192. We shall also recall that, according to Symeon the New Theologian, the Spirit is “the key to the door. . . . Through him and firstly in him our spirit is enlightened and purified, we are illuminated with the light of knowledge, and also of God baptized from above, regenerated and made to be children.” A very good transreligious synthesis of the Elijah phenomenon can be found in Jacques Bonnet’s study, “Elie et la conception du Retour,” *Etudes Traditionnelles*, no. 436, (March-April 1973).
  80. See “Knowledge and Way of Inwardness. A Biographical Approach.”
  81. Although one may think that this was a different sort of encounter, Titus Burckhardt (Ibrâhîm ‘Izz ed-Dîn) mentioned in his unpublished “*Quelques souvenirs*,” dictated shortly before his death, a rather similar meeting that occurred during his youth in Marrakech: “The stranger whom I saw there was indeed out of the ordinary: he was wearing a black burnous, Arab cavalier’s boots, and a turban that was tight between his chin and forehead, which gave a mummy-like impression to his ascetic, royal face. The Sufi stranger turned completely in my direction—we were seated at the two extremities of a half-circle—and asked where S.Ibrâhîm was. The *Muqaddem* said to me, ‘Here is the man you desired so much to meet, approach him and ask his blessings.’ As I stood up, the stranger also stood up and said, ‘No. May he who has just entered Islam bless the others, for he is like a sword freshly drawn from the sheath.’ Then he bid us farewell and left.” The Sufi stranger had previously stressed the necessity of “recognizing the same truth in the Torah, the Gospels and the Muhammadan *shâri’ah* just as in all sacred

- books." In another context, the great German mystic and theosophist Jakob Boehme also mentioned the mysterious visit of a stranger quickened his spiritual destiny.
82. According to the tradition, Khidr has no fixed abode; he is always moving throughout the world. When referring to the *Afrâd*, Ibn 'Arabî talks explicitly of "cavaliers."
  83. In the *Surah XVIII*, Moses says exactly to the mysterious servant, "May I follow you, that you may teach me what you have learnt concerning the straight path?"
  84. Letter of June 5, 1934. Guénon replied shortly after, "It is not impossible that this is one of the forms taken on by the Shaykh (as certain of the Mostaghanem *fuqarâ* had suggested) for some special reason; I believe rather, though I am unable to affirm it, that it was one of the members of the hidden hierarchy. . . ."
  85. In a letter (March 23, 1983) Schuon later said that these words "became engraved upon (him) in an indelible way . . . and gave [him] a feeling of unlimited confidence in this mysterious man" *Memories and Meditations*, 84.
  86. *Fârd* is the singular of *Afrâd*. According to a *hadîth*, the Prophet Muhammad said, "The isolated will be the first" and in answer to the question "Who are the isolated?" he replied, "Those who invoke much." Ibn 'Arabî developed at length the question of the *Afrâd* in his *Futûhât al-Makkiyya* (*Les Illuminations de la Mecque*), chosen texts, presented and translated under the direction of Michel Chodkiewicz, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997).
  87. Quoted by Henry Corbin, *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn Arabi* (Paris: Aubier, 1993), 52–53.
  88. Quoted by Louis Massignon, *Opera minora*, vol. 1 (Paris: PUF, 1964), 245.
  89. In his *Futûhât*, Ibn 'Arabî confirmed that the *ârifûn bi-llâh* (the "knowledgeable-through-God") are the only ones for whom "theophany is perpetual."
  90. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, "The Mystery of the Veil," 47.
  91. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 232.
  92. Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 71.
  93. The importance conferred to Immanence and thus to Beauty should be related to the fact that he was undeniably by nature a visual person, which his early talent for drawing then painting showed. At a very young age, he already illustrated his letters with austere Indian, Asiatic, or Arab portraits.
  94. *The Book of Keys*, 162. Shaykh Al-'Alawî expressed the same point of view: "It is important not to exaggerate incomparability (*tanzîh*), but to know God through analogy (*tashbîh*)."
  95. *The Book of Keys*, 241.
  96. *Roots of the Human Condition* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1991). Consciousness of Immanence—"God is really immanent in the

world without which the world could not exist,” stressed Schuon in *From the Divine to the Human* in the chapter “The sense of the Sacred”—is obviously not the pantheism which reduces God to the world. Many a time Schuon has dealt with the “pantheist error”—“the great resource for all those who want to brush aside esotericism with a minimum of inconvenience”—which “consists in the admission of a continuity between the Infinite and the finite,” a confusion which “presupposes a substantial, and therefore false, idea of Being.” *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), 55. This issue is more closely developed in *To Have a Center* in the chapter “Degrees and scope of Theism,” 112.

97. “The Supreme Principle, in itself, is neither transcendent nor immanent; it is ‘what it is’; it is only with regard to Manifestation that there can be either Transcendence or Immanence. Transcendence annihilates, reduces, or belittles the manifested; Immanence on the contrary ennobles, dilates, or enlarges it, not in every respect, but insofar as it asserts itself in a particular, direct, and central way. Extinction and Union; *Fanâ* and *Baqâ*,” he stated in *The Book of Keys*, 293.
98. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 55.
99. *In the Face of the Absolute*, 195. It is also in this perspective that one should understand Schuon’s attraction to the Native American world, “which has a very distinctive—yet universal—*barakah* because it is deeply rooted in the phenomenon of immanence represented by Virgin Nature; here is a fascinating element of nobleness and grandness which opposes all that is trivial, and abolishes all tensions; it is the atmosphere of Eagle and Sun, which radiates joy, strength, and serenity. It is an aspect of *Fitrah*, which is theoretically accessible everywhere, obviously; every true esoterist must be a *hanîf*. Here, we are far from the meanders of theology.” (unpublished data) *Fitrah* refers to the original norm, and thus to the primordial perfection of man as *pontifex*.
100. *Traité de l’Amour* (from *Kitâb al-Futuhât al-Makkiyya*) (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986) and *L’Interprète des Désirs* (*Tarjumân al-Ashwâq*) (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996) both translated by Maurice Gloton. In his foreword, Pierre Lory points out that this work “clearly emerges from the akbarian corpus, and on more than one account. First because of the circumstances which gave birth to it: a fulgurating experience of a spiritual love aroused by a meeting with the young Iranian Sufi Nizhâm bint Rustum. Here it is not a question of an abstract doctrinal explanation on human love, but an experienced outpouring told directly by one of the greatest minds of Muslim spirituality.” It may be noted—and this is not without significance—that Schuon published, in August 1934, in a special issue of *Voile d’Isis* dedicated to Islamic Tradition, a translation of six poems derived from *Tarjumân al-Ashwâq* including the well-known: “My heart has opened to all forms: it is a pasture for gazelles and a monastery for Christian monks;/ And a temple

- of idols and the pilgrim's Kaaba, and the Torah tables, and the holy book, the Quran./ I practice the religion of Love; in whatever direction its camels may go, the religion of Love will be my religion and my faith."
101. See Pierre Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité de regard* (Paris: Folio-Essai, 1997), 22.
  102. *To Have a Center*, 55. Simone Weil very rightly said that "the most perfect attention is prayer."
  103. In a passage of his remarkable "Images of Islam" (*Christianity/Islam*, 187) Schuon also pointed out, when speaking of the reason for the existence of Shiism, the importance of both tendencies or mysteries inherent in the person of the Prophet, and showed that the scission which occurred between the Companions after his death were linked to these tendencies or different perspectives: Fear, "The dry Way," with emphasis on "faith that saves" being more characteristic of Sunnism; and Love, "The moist Way" and "personalising devotion" being more characteristic of Shiism. In some ways, a similar dichotomy can equally be found today among many of Schuon's disciples.
  104. *To Have a Center*, 55. Remembering Plato's words, "Beauty is the splendor of the True," he also qualifies, in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, the Infinite as "the aura of the Absolute." This balance is also present throughout his works, in which his explanations of pure metaphysics are dotted with poetic flashes.
  105. "The Message of the Human Body," in *From the Divine to the Human* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1982), 95. This is also what the Taoist duality of Yang and Yin expresses or, by analogy, that of fire and water. See also "Manifestations of the Divine Principle," in *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1995), 73–81.
  106. *The Book of Keys*, 664.
  107. Concerning this, see Christian Jambet's introduction to Jalâloddîn Rûmî, *Soleil du Réel* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1999).
  108. Albin Michel, *Fuṣūḥ al-hikam (La Sagesse des Prophètes)*, translated by Titus Burckhardt, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1974), 202.
  109. *From the Divine to the Human*, 91.
  110. *Ibid*, p. 95.
  111. Rûzbihân, *Le Jasmin des Fidèles d'Amour* par Henry Corbin (Lagrasse, France: Verdier, 1991), 88.
  112. In his *En Islam iranien*, vol. 3, p. 27, Corbin, following Rûzbihân, also pointed out that "he to whom it is given to penetrate that which is the very secret of the theophanies, also knows what the Masters mean when talking of the 'trial of the Veil,' and to triumph over the trial is to maintain one's gaze direct like the Prophet, during the vision of the 'lotus of limit': before every theophanic vision may one's gaze neither turn away nor exceed."

113. "Normes et paradoxes dans l'Alchimie initiatique," *Connaissance des Religions*, nos. 41–42 (January–June, 1995).
114. *The Book of Keys*, 1018.
115. See Pierre Feuga, *Tantrisme* (Paris: Dangles, 1994), 275.
116. Patrick Laude, *Massignon intérieur* (Paris-Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 2001), 97.
117. *Rahmah* is divine Mercy.
118. *The Book of Keys*, 664.
119. Denise Brahimi, *La vie et l'oeuvre de Etienne Dinot* (Paris: ACR éditions, 1984–1990), 93.
120. *L'imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn Arabî* (Paris: Aubier, 1993), 130.
121. *The Book of Keys*, 350.
122. *In the Face of the Absolute*, 137.
123. *Supra*, 41.
124. *Ar-Rahmân, Ar-Rahîm*.
125. "Mary 'is clothed with the sun' because she is clothed with Beauty, 'the splendor of the True,' and she is 'black but beautiful' because the Veil is both closed and transparent, or because, after having been closed by virtue of inviolability, it opens by virtue of mercy." *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 62. In *divinis*, Mary is secret and hidden Beatitude (*Ânanda*); through "ineffable integration" she is identified with divine Femininity, she is the divine Shakti. For Saint Maximilien Kolbe (1894–1941) "the Immaculate is the quasi-incarnation of the Holy-Spirit." Just as for Schuon, she is also "the impersonation of the Holy Spirit as the expressions *Gratia plena* and *Mater Dei* clearly indicate." *From the Divine to the Human*, 41. Which brings us implicitly back to Khidr, also perceived as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit and thus "Mary's spouse," or to the symbolism of the "Gate of Heaven" or the "Key to the Door." From this point of view if we go back to the "esoteric god-parent" linked to the notion of *Ânanda*, it may be noted that the first thirty-three years of Schuon's spiritual life are indeed marked by the masculine aspect of the Spirit—represented by Khidr—while the latter thirty-three years are marked by its feminine aspect in the form of Marial grace. This double spiritual God-parentage, which reflects the double divine attribution of Science and Mercy to its servant in the Quranic *surah XVIII*, corroborates the essentially "pneumatic" nature of Schuon's personality.
126. Taken from *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, (London: Perennial Books, 1966), 143–144. To the Guénonian concept of Tradition, Schuon preferred the term *religio* because "the *religio* is that which binds (*religat*) man to Heaven and engages his whole being" whereas *traditio* refers "to a more outward and sometimes fragmentary reality, besides suggesting a retrospective outlook." In Arabic the word *dîn* reconciles both perspectives.

127. This is certainly not a “super religion” as has been wrongly supposed—which would be absurd—but a quintessence of the revealed religions: “The affirmation of the spiritual equivalence of the great revelations cannot become the basis of a system, still less of a method, which would be a contradiction and a pleonasm.” *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (London: Perennial Books, 1987), 121.
128. See *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, translated by Lord Northbourne (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1984), 42.
129. The two Names of Mercy, *Ar-Rahmân* and *Ar-Rahîm*, have in this context a particular meaning. As Eva de Vitray notes in *La prière en Islam* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), 67, the first of these names refers to God in that he is merciful in his Essence, the second in that he *makes* mercy. These divine names thus express the double aspect, transcendent and immanent, of the Creator’s tenderness. In the same vein, Schuon said in *Understanding Islam* (London: Perennial Books, 1966), 63 that *Ar-Rahmân* evokes a “sky full of light” and *Ar-Rahîm* a “warm ray coming from the sky and giving life to man.” Because he took into account the ambience of the modern world, woven with forgetfulness and profanation, Schuon attached a particular importance to the invocation of this double divine aspect in his method, which the “Marian presence” would reinforce: “To say that Seyydetnâ Maryam is *Dikru’Llâh*, ‘Remembrance of God,’ means that she is *Wujûd*, ‘Being,’ *Rahmah*, ‘Mercy,’ and *Fanâ*, ‘Extinction’; the complementarity *Rahmah-Fanâ* corresponds to the complementary opposition *Amor-Mors*, the latter being understood in a beatific, even ecstatic, sense. Through Mercy, the virgin and maternal Being fulfils us; through Extinction, the Being takes us from ourselves. Here is a certain analogy with the names *Rahmân* (Beneficent) and *Rahîm* (Merciful) in the sense that God, being *Rahmah*, brings creatures—possibilities—into Existence, and being *Rahîm* leads them back to him and deifies them; on the one hand, he draws them, so to speak, from nothingness, and on the other, He brings them back to what we could call, in relation to existential plenitude, the ‘Divine Emptiness,’ which is the true Plenitude, the only one that is.” (*The Book of Keys*, 436).
130. *The Book of Keys*, 1038.
131. Christ is “the Seal of Sanctity” according to Islam.
132. *In the Face of the Absolute*, 229. By symmetry, the Immanence of the Christic message implied that Jesus appeared in a divine form as Schuon noted in a private text (293). The term “krishnaite” refers to *râsa-lîlâ*, the *gopis*’ dance around Krishna, the legendary Avatâra of Vishnu, of which the symbolism is susceptible to numerous applications but which is essentially to be related here to the “spiritual capacity to find concretely in woman all the aspects of the Divine Femininity.” *Ibid.*, 221.

## CHAPTER 3. ESOTERISM AND TRADITION

1. Paradoxically, and perhaps surprisingly for some of his readers, Schuon may appear, in some respects, to reveal more affinity with the overall spiritual flavor of Louis Massignon's and Henry Corbin's works than with some of the mathematical and administrative aspects of Guénon's work. Guénon and Schuon share the essentials of the traditionalist or perennialist school, and they undoubtedly are the two main inspiring figures of this school. However, notwithstanding his sharing with Guénon the universal scope of esotericism as language of the Self, the general spiritual climate of Schuon's message, as Agustín López has rightly suggested, is more in tune with the spiritual aesthetics of a Corbin or even the noble and theocentric spiritual humanism of a Massignon. The latter could have concurred with his "all that is human is ours," while the former would have fully responded to his emphasis on the Islamic sentence, "God is beautiful and he loves Beauty." It seems also that Corbin, Massignon and Schuon leave much more room for the imponderable elements of grace than Guénon and some other traditionalists do. The emphasis on initiation and tradition can sometimes entail a surprising lack of sense for the "Spirit that bloweth where it listeth," if not in theory at least in practice.
2. In this connection, one may refer to two recent and most valuable contributions: *Traditionalism*, by Kenneth Oldmeadow (Colombo, Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka Institute of traditional Studies, 2000) and "Tradition as a Spiritual Function," by Reza Shah-Kazemi in *Sacred Web*, vol. 7 (2001). These studies stress the spiritual need of tradition, and its function in the inner life of spiritual aspirants. They specifically address an audience that may not be aware of the need and benefits of a traditional framework, especially in the context of "New Age spirituality."
3. *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon* (New York: Element, 1986), 6.
4. "To say objectivity is to say totality." *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 15.
5. "No believer denies that God may sacrifice certain possibilities of Mercy to the imperative demands of the Truth, otherwise no Justice would be possible; but it must equally be admitted—although there is no symmetry between the two—that God may sacrifice truths that are in practice secondary to the imperatives of saving Mercy, otherwise there would be no religions or confessional divergences. What this amounts to is that in practice a secondary truth is no longer truth when it is eliminated on behalf of an essential truth, exactly as a lamp is no longer a light in the presence of the sun and is even a cause of obscurity since it then casts a shadow; this also means that error as such could not be from God, but is on the contrary prefigured—if it figures extrinsically in a traditional symbolism—in the very structure of the human receptacle." *Christianity/Islam: Visions of Esoteric*

*Ecumenicism* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1981); *Christianisme/Islam: Visions d'Oecuménisme ésotérique* (Milano: Archè, 1981), 150–151.

6. *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 7.
7. Schuon's understanding of the spiritual elite has nothing sectarian or occultist about it. For him, it seems that the notion of a spiritual elite can be understood in two plain senses. First, the term may refer to those whose approach to spirituality is primarily (but not exclusively) intellectual, and who are therefore in consonance with the message of gnosis. In a second sense, the spiritual elite is nothing other than the society of contemplative and sanctified souls. Quite obviously, the two groups are not necessarily comprised of the same individuals, and it is immensely preferable to be a nonpneumatic saint than a worldly intellectual.
8. "Every traditional doctrine has an aspect of system and an aspect of indeterminacy; this latter appears in the variety of orthodox perspectives, hence also in the plurality of systems, such as may appear in the writings of one and the same author, above all in the esoteric field." *Language of the Self* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1999), 12.
9. The Amîr 'Abd al-Qâdir expresses this spiritual reality when he explains his apparent contradictions in the following terms: "I commented a same hadîth according to an interpretation that is in contradiction with the current one, following an inspiration that is contradictory vis-à-vis the one that comes to me." *Ecrits spirituels*, translation Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Le Seuil, 1982), 172. The reference to "inspirations" expresses in a mystical language the variety of the divine aspects that may seize the soul and the intelligence.
10. "Thus esoterism as such is metaphysics, to which is necessarily joined an appropriate method of realization. But the esoterism of a particular religion—of a particular exoterism precisely—tends to adapt itself to this religion and thereby enter into theological, psychological, and legalistic meanders foreign to its nature, while preserving in its secret center its authentic and plenary nature, but for which it would not be what it is." Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1986), 115.
11. "[the esoteric nucleus], however, is not in any sense a part, even an inner part, of the exoterism, but represents, on the contrary, a quasi-independent 'dimension' in relation to the latter." Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, (Wheaton-Madras-London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993), 9–10.
12. "Beyond Being" refers to the Divine inasmuch as it is independent from any duality such as Creator creature. This is the Divine Essence that transcends all determinations, including that of Being.



13. "The 'subjective supernatural' has need—'accidentally' and not 'essentially'—of the 'objective supernatural,' but once it is thus 'awakened to itself' by what corresponds to it outside of us, no extrinsic objection can concern it further." Schuon, *Gnosis, Divine Wisdom* (Bedfont, Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1990), 32.
14. Such a reduction should in no way be confused with the liberal attitude that consists in picking and choosing what one likes in a religion while neglecting what one dislikes or what is deemed irrelevant. It has no common ground either with a modernist concern for the purity of a religion or its moral core. Its criteria are exclusively spiritual, and its scope is always dependent upon a clear discernment of the quintessential content of the religion.
15. "A master whose spiritual outlook is limited by a particular formal or traditional framework is not a complete master (although a true master may in practice be unfamiliar with traditions other than his own); and a master who rejects all forms is a false master (although *a true master may reduce traditional form to its essential elements, and he surely will.*") Titus Burckhardt, "A Letter on Spiritual Method," in *Mirror of the Intellect* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), 252.
16. "We could say, simplifying a little, that exoterism puts the form—the credo—above the essence—Universal Truth—and accepts the latter only as a function of the former; the form, through its divine origin, is here the criterion of the essence. Esoterism, on the contrary, puts the essence above the form and only accepts the latter as a function of the former; for esoterism, and in accordance with the real hierarchy of values, the essence is the criterion of the form; the one and universal Truth is the criterion of the various religious forms of the Truth." Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 37.
17. "It is therefore in every case 'our own people' and no other who perpetuate primordial humanity from the point of view both of wisdom and of the virtues; and this outlook, it must be recognized, is neither more nor less false than the exclusivism of the religions nor, on the purely natural plane, than each ego's experience that he alone is 'I.'" *Lights on the Ancient Worlds* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1984), 8.
18. *The Book of Keys*, 194.
19. "The principle according to which 'prayer of the heart' can replace all other rites—on condition of sufficient spiritual maturity—is to be found in Hesychasm, but is much more emphasized in the Hindu and Buddhist paths, where the abandonment of general ritual prayers and practices is considered normal and sometimes even a *conditio sine qua non*. The profound reason for this is that it is necessary to distinguish between the realm of the 'divine Will' and that of the 'divine Nature'; the latter 'is what it is' and is expressed by the Name alone, whereas the former projects into the human world dif-

- ferentiated—and necessarily relative—wills and is expressed by complex prayers, corresponding to the complexity of human nature. Rites, however—especially those of a purifying or sacramental character—can be considered as necessary aids to support prayer of the heart; this belongs to a point of view deriving from a perspective differing from the one just envisaged, and better suited to certain temperaments.” *Stations of Wisdom*, 129–130.
20. As if deviations could not come in many guises, including traditional ones, such as pharisaism.
  21. “The paradox of esoterism is that on the one hand ‘men do not light a candle and put it under a bushel,’ while on the other hand ‘give not what is sacred to dogs’; between these two expressions lies the ‘light that shineth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not.’ There are fluctuations here which no one can prevent and which are the ransom of contingency.” Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 19.
  22. When speaking about esoterism, if one had to be wary of all possible misconstructions, one would remain silent. Moreover, one all too easily forgets that esoterism does not address everybody. It has no intrinsic reason to adapt its views and language to the lowest common exoteric denominator, this being said with no elitist pretension whatsoever, for sanctity does not belong to any group or perspective.
  23. “‘The wind bloweth where it listeth,’ and because of its universality shatters forms, though it must needs clothe itself in a form while on the formal plane.” Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 32.
  24. It is interesting to note, in this connection, that mistletoe was considered as sacred and as a kind of panacea in many traditional civilizations, of which the Celts are the primary example. According to Roger Baron as quoted by Frazer, it was considered as “a plant fallen from the sky, a gift of the divinity.” *The New Golden Bough* (New York: Mentor Books, 1959), 674. In several countries, the mistletoe that grows on oaks is especially auspicious. In a sense, the oak is the exoteric tradition that provides a support for the esoteric grace represented by the mistletoe. In Western Europe, the gathering of mistletoe is moreover often associated with St. John’s Eve in the summer, which points to an esoteric symbolism.
  25. “Esoterism, in fact, is not an unpredictable doctrine that can only be discovered, should the occasion arise, by means of detailed researches; what is mysterious in esoterism is its dimension of depth, its particular developments and its practical consequences, but not its starting-points, which coincide with the fundamental symbols of the religion in question; moreover its continuity is not exclusively ‘horizontal’ as is that of exoterism; it is also ‘vertical.’ . . .” “The Supreme Commandment,” in *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Shaftesbury, Dorset-Rockport, Massachusetts: Element, 1991), 227.

26. "Religion is like a walnut, to use the Sufi image, with both a shell and the core or fruit which can grow and possess existence only within the shell. The purpose of the shell is to protect the fruit but without the shell there would be no fruit." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, introduction to *The Essential Writings of Frithjof Schuon*, 12.
27. If one may speak of a "guarantee" in this case, for no form is a guarantee in and of itself, independently from the presence and efficiency of divine grace within it—otherwise there would not be such things as "dead forms."
28. He initiated Schuon into his branch of the Shadhîlî Order in January 1933. Lings, Martin, *Un saint musulman du vingtième siècle* (Paris: Editions Traditionnelles, 1978), 33.
29. "In other words, it is important to distinguish the following aspects in exoterism: the formal system, which offers symbols and means; the exoteric way, which is based exclusively upon this system; the exoteric mentality, which is formalistic, voluntaristic and individualistic, and which adds all kinds of restrictive sentimentalities to the simple forms. These are three altogether different meanings of the term "exoterism": according to the first, the religious Law is necessary and venerable, and it becomes a constitutive element of esoterism; according to the second meaning, the Law is different from esoterism without necessarily excluding certain elements of the latter; according to the third meaning, there is an antinomy between the outward and the inward, or between the letter and the spirit." "Ambiguity of Exoterism," in *In the Face of the Absolute* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1989), 19–36, chapter 2 in *Approches du phénomène religieux* (Paris: Courrier du livres, 1984).
30. "Shiva cannot be imprisoned in the castle of transcendence. Within Shiva there always occurs an overflowing, a surging vibration that leads the infinity of Shiva continuously to surpass itself. Any boundary that might be set for Shiva, any limit that one might attempt to impose in order to contain Shiva will, by the very definition of Shiva as freedom, be overthrown. The boundary will be destroyed and the unbounded freedom of Shiva will assert itself. In fact, this process of self-transcendence is self-referential: when we define Shiva as unbounded freedom, he immediately goes beyond this definition and plays the game of hide-and-seek, by manifesting the boundaries of the finite self and the limited experience of the visible world. He thus transcends unbounded freedom by becoming bound and not free. . . . As soon as the process of manifestation of boundaries occurs, Shiva initiates the process by which it may overflow these boundaries, which he has imposed on himself. He structures the path of return traversed by himself, in the guise of the ignorant, finite self." (Paul Eduardo Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Shiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual Shaivism of Kashmir* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press 1989), 138–139.

31. "The seeds of esoterism are everywhere present, sparks can flash from every flint; to make esoterism result from a religious program and a theological argument is a contradiction in terms." "Diversity of Paths," in *In the Face of the Absolute*, 174, note 1.
32. "We would like to say a few words concerning the integration of a foreign element into a particular traditional formalism; this problem places us between syncretism, which is intrinsically heterodox, and esoterism, which in certain cases can admit such coincidences. This is because, in principle, esoterism is open to all forms, as Ibn 'Arabî expressed himself in speaking of his heart; but in fact, such exceptions depend upon certain subjective as well as objective conditions; therefore we must ask, not only what has been done, but also by whom and for what reason." "The Ambiguity of Exoterism," in *In the Face of the Absolute*, 29.
33. In this connection, it may be useful to recall that the first step of discernment entails awareness of the qualitative spiritual gap that lies between the master and the disciple. The disciple's discernment manifests itself a priori in a surrender to the master in all that pertains to spiritual life for, as Ghazâlî put it, "The disciple must cling to his shaikh as a blind man on the edge of a river clings to his leader, confiding himself to him entirely, opposing him in no matter whatsoever, and binding himself to follow him absolutely. Let him know that the advantage he gains from the error of his shaikh, if he should err, is greater than the advantage he gains from his own rightness, if he should be right." Quoted by H.A.R. Gibb in *Mohammedanism* (New York: A Mentor Book, 1955), 117. Moreover, one should also keep in mind that it is difficult, if not impossible, for the disciple to determine the inner significance of his master's behavior given that "the ethical trace of a spiritual degree is all the more subtle as the degree is more lofty and the incommensurability between the Reality contemplated and the human receptacle more profound." Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufism* (San Francisco: Thorsons, 1995), 88.
34. This explains why it is not correct to consider that Schuon has ever thought of himself as a prophet in the sense in which Islam understands the mission of its own Messenger.
35. Jean Borella, *Esotérisme guénonien et mystère chrétien* (Paris-Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1997), 50.
36. "[E]soterism resides not only in the choice of ideas, but also in the manner of envisaging things." Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 9.
37. "Of course, the object of the decisive intuition is not the extrinsic limitations of religions—the overaccentuations, narrowness, and ostracisms—but their intrinsic and therefore universal truths. . . ." Schuon, *In the Face of the Absolute*, 15.
38. "To return to what was said above about the understanding of ideas, a theoretical notion may be compared to the view of an object. Just as this view

does not reveal all possible aspects, or in other words, the integral nature of the object, the perfect knowledge of which would be nothing less than identity with it, so a theoretical notion does not itself correspond to the integral truth, of which it necessarily suggests only one aspects, essential or otherwise. . . . As for a speculative and therefore intellectually unlimited conception, this may be compared to the sum of all possible views of the object in question, views that presuppose in the subject a power of displacement or an ability to alter his view-point, hence a certain mode of identity with the dimensions of space, which themselves effectually reveal the integral nature of the object, at least with respect to its form, which is all that is in question in the example given.” Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 5.

39. See *Stations of Wisdom*, 147–152.

40. “*L’espace qui est partout centre.*” *The Book of Keys*, 977.

41. *Stations of Wisdom*, 148.

42. “*La durée qui est toujours présente.*” *The Book of Keys*, 977.

43. It is interesting to mention, in this connection, the Acathist Hymn of the Eastern Church that defines Mary as “Space of the Infinite God.” Cf. James Cutsinger, “The Virgin,” *Sophia*, vol. 6, no. 2, (winter 2000).

44. This is akin to the double-edged character of *vajra* that René Guénon describes in the following terms: “As for lightning, it is considered . . . as representing a double power of production and destruction; one can say, if one wishes, power of life and death. . . . In fact, this is the force that produces all the ‘condensations’ and ‘dissipations’ that the Far-Eastern tradition relates to the alternating action of the two complementary principles *yin* and *yang*, and which correspond also to the two phases of the universal ‘expir’ and ‘inspir’; this is what the hermetic doctrine calls ‘coagulation’ and ‘solution’; and the double action of this force is symbolized by the two opposite extremities of *vajra* as ‘fulgurant’ weapon whereas the diamond clearly represents its one and indivisible essence.” English translation from *Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 195–196.

45. “Esoterism, by its interpretations, its revelations and its interiorizing and essentializing operations, tends to realize pure and direct objectivity; this is the reason for its existence.” Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 15.

46. Any society needs conventions, and conventions have a positive and balancing role to play for both the group and the individual. This being said, the esoteric outlook can only see them for what they are, which amounts to being free from them in principle, and sometimes in fact.

47. Pride is in this respect the most prohibitive and deadly sin.

48. Ramana Maharshi points to this dangerous tendency when saying, “In appearance, a *jīvan-mukta* may give the impression of being ignorant or lacking wisdom. His attitude is provoked by his *prārabdha*. In reality, his

spirit is always pure as crystal, such as ether (*ākāsha*), which always keeps its clarity, whether it be covered with dark clouds or not. He takes delight in the Self, as a loving spouse feels the pleasure of the embrace of her only husband. Although he remains silent, as an ignorant, his indifference does not stem from his lack of knowledge but from the duality that is implicit in ordinary language. His silence is the highest expression of his non-dualistic realization, which is in the last analysis the essence of the Vedas. Although he instructs disciples, he does not take a pose of master, being fully convinced that the pair master-disciple is only a convention born from illusion (*Mâyâ*), so that he continues using expressions such as *ākāshavani*. If, on the other hand, he pronounces incoherent words as a fool, this is because his experience is inexpressible, as the words of lovers during their embrace. If, on the contrary, his language is ornate and flowery as that of an orator, the reason for it is his remembering past experiences since he is the inalterable and only Reality without duality, deprived of desires. If he sometimes appears to be suffering deep pain, as anybody else, it is in fact because he is feeling toward his sensory faculties the just compassion and the just pity that it befits to attribute to their illusory play, for he has realized that his senses are but mere instruments that ensure the manifestation of the Supreme Being. When he seems to be acutely interested by the marvels of the world, he is in fact only ridiculing the ignorance that is born from superimposition. If he appears to enjoy sensual pleasures, it must be understood that he enjoys the eternal bliss that is inherent to the Self and that the latter, being divided into two, the individual self and the universal Self, feels the delights of their embrace that reintegrates them into their natural and original nature. If he appears to be angry, it is for his offender's sake. All his actions must be interpreted as being solely the divine manifestation on the human plane. One must therefore feel no doubt concerning his liberation even though he is still alive. He lives exclusively for the world's sake. Do not commit the error of criticizing the *jñānin* by founding your feeling on his apparent behavior. Remember the story of King Parikshit. He was dead at birth. Women were crying around his cradle as they invoked Krishna's assistance. The sages who were present were wondering how Krishna could save the child from the wound done by Ashvatthâmâ's invisible arrows (*apândavâstra*). Krishna told them: "If this child is touched by somebody who is eternally chaste (*nitya-brahmachârin*) he will come back to life." Even Çuka did not dare touching the child. As none of the great saints was bold enough to come close to the cradle, Krishna said: "If I am eternally pure, let this child come back to life." He came close to the child, touched him, and the child was back alive, he breathed again and later became King Parikshit. See how Krishna, who was surrounded by 16,000 *gopîs* still

- remained eternally chaste. This is the mystery of *jīvan-muktas*! A *jīvan-mukta* does not see anything as separated from the Self.” translated from *L'enseignement de Ramana Maharshi* (Paris: Albon Michel, 1972), 386.
49. For Schuon, a collectivity is legitimate only to the extent that it favors spiritual solitude: “Solitude is the gateway to Inwardness, and spiritual company is a collective solitude and an interiorization by reciprocal influences.” *Logic and Transcendence*, 191. But the fact is that society as it is most commonly understood and lived, by virtue of the law of gravity that is inherent to any collectivity is a “*monde de coulisses*” (a world of theatrical backstage) in which wisdom is madness: “Folly alone can allow itself to enunciate cruel truths and to touch idols, precisely because it stands apart from certain human relationships (*engrenages*=mechanical workings) and this proves that in the world of theatrical artificiality which is society, the pure and simple truth is madness.” *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, note 4, 25.
  50. This led Guénon to assert that the Supreme Principle lies beyond Being and Non-Being, which may be deemed to be an ambiguous or ill-sounding way to place it beyond all dualities.
  51. *Logic and Transcendence*, 170.
  52. “C’est là une action magique, mais qui peut fort bien s’intégrer dans une vision spirituelle des choses. Puisque les liens subtils entre l’homme et son ambiance naturelle existent, on peut en faire usage comme on utilise des conditions physiques. Ce qui importe, du point de vue spirituel, c’est la conscience de la hiérarchie réelle des choses.” *Symboles* (Milano: Archè, 1980), 15.
  53. “Les faux maîtres parlent volontiers du ‘développement d’énergies latentes’; or on peut aller en enfer avec tous les développements et toutes les énergies qu’on voudra. [False masters often speak of the ‘development of latent energies’; now one may go to Hell with all the developments and all the energies that one wishes.]” *Le Jeu des Masques*, note 7, 25.
  54. In this respect, Titus Burckhardt’s works provide a complement to Schuon’s. This is particularly true of *Alchemy*, *Science of the Cosmos*, *Science of the Soul* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1997).
  55. *Wakiniyan* is also the angel of the *Heyoka*, who are considered to be the most powerful shamans in Sioux religion. *Hehaka Sapa* (Black Elk) was one of them. Let us recall in this connection that the *Heyoka* vocation, that entails both intense suffering and clownish and contrary behavior, is induced by visions of or contacts with lightning. The contrary aspect is moreover not without relationship with the intellectual perspective, esoteric subversion of external forms, as is the eccentric clownesque behavior of *Heyoka*.
  56. Interestingly, Schuon has used the same dual and complementary symbolism to refer to Islam: “[T]he Absolute—or consciousness of the Absolute—

- thus [in Islam] engenders in the soul the qualities of rock and lightning, the former being represented by the Kaaba, which is the center, and the latter by the sword of the holy war, which marks the periphery." *Understanding Islam*, 34.
57. The same could be said of Ramana Maharshi's "Father," the mountain Arunâchala, manifestation of Shiva.
  58. One could mention, here, the central function of the rock in the purifying ceremony of the sweat lodge. In fact the sweat lodge sees the convergence of all four elements: the fire heats up the rock—mineral earth—that vaporizes water into air.
  59. "Or tout cela ne résulte de rien d'autre que de la diversité des théophanies, laquelle est fonction de la multiplicité de ceux à qui elles sont destinées et de la diversité de leurs dispositions essentielles." Emir Abd el-Kader, *Ecrits spirituels*, translated by Michel Chodkiewicz (Paris: Le Seuil, 1982), 133.
  60. "Their error consists only in the fact of determining the One limitatively [by identifying Him exclusively to a particular theophany]." *Ibid.*, 133.
  61. "Those who are destined to perdition are only so because of their disobedience to the orders and prohibitions that have been brought by the Messengers of Allâh. . . ." *Ibid.*, 128.
  62. "The Shaykh (Ibn Arabî) explains why disobeying the prescriptive command may lead to wretchedness by referring to the implications of some of the qualities of *wujûd*. God is not only Guide, He is also Misguider (*mudill*). Although not mentioned in the well-known list of ninety-nine names, this name is implied by thirty-five Koranic verses in which God is the subject of the verb 'to misguide.' In certain circumstances, God's misguidance may dominate over His guidance, leading to disobedience in this world and wretchedness in the next." William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), 142.
  63. *Approches du phénomène religieux*, 17.
  64. There is no doubt, for example, that Ibn 'Arabî's point of view corresponds both to a certain need of causality and to specific intellectual and spiritual temperaments or contexts. It is also more directly connected to some of the literal teachings of the Quran since it is exclusively dependent, in its formulations, on the language of Islam.

#### CHAPTER 4. METAPHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL AESTHETICS

1. "When the question was broached of publishing Schuon's paintings, he at first was rather reluctant because he was concerned that such an art book may detract from the image of his intellectual and spiritual identity; for, let us repeat, the main accent of his message is spiritual and not artistic."



Michael Pollack, in his introduction to the art book *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (Bloomington, Ind.: Abodes, 1992), 3.

2. "My doctrinal message is to be found in my French books and in their translations. It can be found only indirectly and imperfectly in the English compilations *Dimensions of Islam* and *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, which were for a specific occasion and do not correspond to my intentions. On the other hand, the compilations *Language of the Self* and *In the Tracks of Buddhism* are fully part of my message and do not distort my intentions, apart from any possible errors of translation and presentation. . . . I cannot understand the interest of a quantitative propaganda that presents me as a 'prolific' author and makes mention of the slightest scrap of paper and the slightest occasional publication of which my work has no need." Excerpt from an unpublished text entitled "*Remarques sur l'Appendix.*"
3. Schuon is sometimes reproached, as other spiritual men before him, with giving preference to the personal over the traditional, for example, with integrating into his perspective only certain elements of a given spiritual language, and with ultimately isolating them from the traditional totality at issue, or yet again with putting the accent on certain inward or formal realities by virtue of a particular spiritual affinity. Such a reproach amounts to ignoring the fact that every exceptional spiritual personality necessarily sheds light on the phenomena it envisages, beginning from a personal archetype that appears in a mode as coherent and all-embracing as its secret is profound. In this sense, a great sage—or a great saint—is identified with the perspective that he actualizes and transmits, and in the face of which all outward reticence and misunderstandings, even be they traditional, are as nothing.
4. Although the idea for this book did not originate with him, Schuon was involved in the conception and realization of *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* including the choice of paintings and the formatting of the volume down to the most minute details. Before its publication, Schuon knew that this book was unlikely to receive a universally positive reception, but he remained unflinching in his desire to see the book published. He further commented upon the possible negative consequences of this publication by indicating that his coming into the world was not for those of a "bourgeois Muslim mentality." The great majority of the paintings reproduced in this book are Schuon's, but a small number of them were either painted by one of his close associates and friends on Schuon's ideas and under his supervision, or jointly painted. It goes without saying that Schuon would not have agreed to the publication of this book under his name had not he been in agreement with the inclusion of all paintings involved, and had he not considered them as an expression of his own pictorial style.

5. "At the moment of sanctity a saint is given a special gift. In the case of Schuon, this gift was the 'discernment of forms.' He has the ability to look at a piece of clothing or an artifact from a culture and know everything about that culture. He sees the archetypes inherent in all things and immediately understands the essence of the form and the entire culture from which it came. . . ." Notes from a private interview with Titus Burckhardt, transmitted by Michael Fitzgerald.
6. A *contrario*, one can observe that the contemporary spiritual perspectives that tend to reduce or veil the esoteric dimension are also characterized de facto by a relative deficiency in the domain of the discernment of forms. To the extent that forms directly reflect the Intellect, an exo-esoterism, or an esoterism that is too bound up with the exoteric mentality, inevitably reveals its limits on the aesthetic plane, and this by too often confusing the beautiful with the traditional.
7. It is thus that beauty is considered in Sufism as *dhikru'LLâh*, remembrance of God.
8. *The Book of Keys*, 724.
9. "[I]n reflecting the Absolute, beauty realizes a mode of regularity, and in reflecting the Infinite, it realizes a mode of mystery . . . ; it is through these two qualities that it stimulates and at the same time appeases the intelligence and also a sensibility which is in conformity with the intelligence." *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 177.
10. "Tiphereth, the 'Beauty' of God, is His infinite Unity, inasmuch as It [Beauty] reveals itself as beatific Plenitude and Harmony of all His Possibilities. Whereas the latter reside in *Kether* in their supreme identity, in *Tiphereth* they appear as particular Archetypes, each of which rejoins the others through essential fusion and qualitative interpenetration. This is why the Kabbalah says: 'When the Colors (or Qualities of the Principle) are intermixed, It is called *Tiphereth*. . . . It is in *Tiphereth*, the Beauty that emanates from the Judgment, that these divine colors are intermixed in a perfect Harmony. For *Tiphereth* is the mediating *Sephirah par excellence*, the 'Heart' of God or His 'Mercy' (*Rahamim*), which embraces and fuses together all that, in the World of emanation, is 'above' and 'below,' 'on the right' and 'on the left.'" L. Schaya, *L'Homme et l'Absolu selon la Kabbale* (Paris: Dervy, 1977), 51.
11. "The Logos combines in *divinis* regularity and mystery, it is so to speak the manifested Beauty of God." *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, 178.
12. One will note that both these aspects relate to the Holy Virgin inasmuch as she is respectively maternal and inviolable.
13. These two points of view are reflected on the plane of the earthly experience of beauty: "Beauty is in one sense always more than it gives, but in

another sense it always gives more than it is. In the first sense the essence shows itself as appearance; in the second the appearance communicates the essence." *Spiritual Perspective and Human Facts* (London: Perennial Books, 1987), 29.

14. *Enneads*, V, 8, 13, 2.

15. *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 85.

16. Schuon thus rejects all moralization of beauty, refusing the expedient that consists in denying the physical beauty of morally imperfect beings, or in considering this beauty only with all the narrow prejudices and the more or less hypocritical suspicions of the ordinary believing mentality.

17. "[W]e can explain certain deformations practiced in sacred art as a reduction to the essence, or as a 'scorching by the essence,' so to speak." *Language of the Self* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1999), 97.

18. "It goes without saying that artistic expression is the prefiguration of spiritual alchemy, whose matter is the soul and which realizes, inwardly and in a fundamental manner, what art demonstrates and promises at the level of immediate perceptions and emotions." *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 2000), 58–59.

19. Concerning modern art, Schuon pointed out that "what is lacking is the instinct of sacrifice, sobriety, restraint; the creator completely empties himself, and in so doing, he invites others to empty themselves as well and thereby to lose all the essential, namely the taste for the secret and the sense of inwardness, whereas the work's reason for being is contemplative and unitive interiorization." *The Transfiguration of Man* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 1995), 47.

20. It is thus definitely a question of archetypes, even if de facto they are envisaged, on the plane of their animic projection, as magical forces. The diversity of levels moreover takes account of the overall unequal character of Shamanism.

21. "As regards sacred art, it must be said that painted and sculpted images also have God as their author since it is He who reveals and creates them through man; He offers the image of Himself by humanizing it. . . ." *The Transfiguration of Man*, 49.

22. *Enneads*, V, 8, 13, 1.

23. Let us note moreover, that like art, magic is basically dangerous only to the extent that it becomes an end in itself. Deviated white magic is an art for art's sake; black magic is a dark art. "White magic (the *yuwipi* of the Lakota) becomes dangerous if it is considered as self-sufficient, exactly as it is dangerous to pray only for earthly advantages." *The Feathered Sun*, 107.

24. An aesthetically harmonious and beautiful ambiance attracts spiritual presences, whereas the ambiance of the big modern cities represents a kind of

- infernal magic on the plane of forms. Iron, concrete, the noise of machines and pollution thus make up the infernal garden of the *princeps hujus mundi*.
25. This correspondence in no way excludes the freedom of grace and the incommensurability between human means and divine ends. Grace could never be envisaged from a moralistic point of view, given the disproportion between Divine Beauty and the inward beauty of man inasmuch as it is an approximation of the former: "Why callest thou me good?"
  26. "The quality of calm derives from the divine Peace, which is made of Beatitude, of infinite Beauty; beauty everywhere and always has at its root an aspect of calm, of existential repose, of equilibrium of possibilities. . . ." *Stations of Wisdom*, 149.
  27. *Enneads*, VI, 2.
  28. *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 23.
  29. One could add that the highest poetry is, like the title of one of Schuon's German collections, a "song without name," since it proceeds from a source of inspiration that surpasses all individual identification.
  30. Schuon, unpublished data.
  31. Schuon also expresses the idea that the music of our world is "hard and grating" compared to celestial music. *Esoterism as Principle and Way*, 138, note 134.
  32. "Freude am Vielen Sehnsucht nach dem Einen," *Lieder ohne Namen*, vol. 3, I, CVIII, (Sottens, Switzerland: Les Sept Flèches, 2002), 180.
  33. "That is, for the contemplative, music evokes all the mystery of the return of the accidents to the Substance." *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism*, 180.
  34. "The art of music presupposes some such access, for its primal purpose is to give us a foretaste of that which now 'we cannot hear'; and its power to stir us to the depths of our being depends on the fidelity with which it echoes the transcendent harmony that underlies our nature." Martin Lings, *Symbol and Archetype*, 65.
  35. "Without this pressure, there is no poetry, which implies that true poetry always has an aspect of inward necessity, whence its irreplaceable perfume." Schuon, unpublished data.
  36. Schuon, unpublished data.
  37. Let us cite two examples representative of this manner without concession to unintelligence and without chilly precautions: "I am the other I of God, in me alone He finds what is like and analogous to Him in all eternity." Translated from *Le Pèlerin chérubinique*, trans. H. Plard, 278, 105. And:

Do not condemn my nudity too quickly, / Man is he who trembles  
in its presence / He is little / Why not go completely naked? / The  
ram of experience must be brought up and nourished for the

sacrifice / Then all these customs will disappear like a garment.  
There is only Atmâ.

*Naked Song*, trad. by Coleman Barks (Athens, Georgia: Maypop, 1992), 63.

38. Published in Bern in 1947.

39. Without taking account of the fact that man also has a certain right to variety, and this to the extent that he lives in the world of forms.

40. We are thinking here of the composition of canvases such as *The Elect* or *The Night*.

41. Let us also note that it is difficult to do justice to the strongly gilded aspect of certain canvases. In an unpublished text, Schuon refers to gold as the color of the heart and to blue as that of the chest or the entire body, whereas silver would correspond to the forehead and the mind. In astrological language, gold refers to the sun (the heart), silver corresponds to the moon (the mind that reflects the heart) and blue to the infinite vault of the sky.

42. This dimension (in which Power and Beauty meet) is related to the soul, whereas the metaphysical doctrine is addressed to the intelligence and the ritual and religious form to the will.

43. "The four 'Winds' are like the 'Productive Forces' (in the Sanskrit sense of the term *Shakti*) of the 'Quarters of the World,' and they are conceived of as encircling the whole horizon and deciding the issues of life on earth by their combined influences." *The Feathered Sun*, 56.

44. "Dance is a way of being. Not only play but celebration, participation and not spectacle, it is tied to magic and to religion, to work and holidays, to love and death. Men have danced all the solemn moments of their existence: war and peace, marriage and funerals, sowing and reaping." Roger Garaudy, *Danser sa vie* (Paris: le Seuil, 1973), 13.

45. It is thus that Alida Martin could suggestively speak of Schuon's works as "magisterial studies of doctrine in which the often poetic resonance of expression, the grace of formulations . . . and the suggestive power of paradox . . . are allied with the fulgurations of a discernment capable of dissolving mental obscurities and antinomies in order to attain to the luminous center of the highest metaphysical realities." "*Nûr-ed-Dîn*," *Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), Connaissance et voie d'intériorité* (Paris: Le Courrier du Livre, 1999), 113.

46. "This lies peacefully, completely naked, without clothing" (*blôs âne wât*). Meister Eckhart, *Le grain de sénévé* (Paris: Arfuyen, 1996), 25.

47. *Form and Substance in the Religions* (Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom Books, 2002), 17, note 6.

48. *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 169.

49. *A contrario*, Schuon could speak of "people of a vestimentary moralism," as he has also stressed the puritanical character of the bourgeois dress.

50. And the “stark naked” truth, one could say. This does not exclude the legitimate and even necessary role of secondary protections on more relative planes, as those of the soul and the body, for one should not yield to a metaphysical sublimism that would take no account of human needs and limitations.
51. Cf. “The Virgin,” *Sophia*, vol. 6, no. 2, (winter 2000).
52. In Henry Corbin, “Le pèlerinage intérieur,” in *En islam iranien*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 105.
53. The first mode appears at its highest point in Hindu dance, which is like a projection of the worlds, the second is clearly felt in the dance of the seven veils, which reveals the nudity of the Essence.
54. It would also no doubt be appropriate to add that man also recognizes what he is animically in a given feminine beauty, whereas he recognizes what he is spiritually in feminine beauty as such.

## CONCLUSION

1. *Logic and Transcendence* (London: Perennial Books, 1984), 202.

## APPENDIX 1

1. This article may have been one of the first that Schuon wrote in French; he sent it to Guénon, who approved of it, adding here and there a word. The text was published much later in *Etudes Traditionnelles*, Paris, November-December 1939, under the title “Considérations générales sur les fonctions spirituelles.”
2. Taking this point even further, one could mention the example of the North American Indians who, with their feathered headdress, symbolically identify with the sun; one could also relate this phenomenon to totemism, when a man identifies with the genius of an animal species which, considered according to its highest positive symbolism, is obviously a kind of spiritual function or *shakti*.

## APPENDIX 2

1. This text was written by Schuon for his Christian disciples in 1954.



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# Index

- ‘Abd al-Qâdir, Shaykh al-Amîr, 103, 169  
 ‘Abd ar-Rahîm, Shaykh, 24  
 ‘Abdallâh Reda, 19  
 Abhinavagupta, 90, 157  
 Abraham, 7, 8  
 Adam, 73  
 Adda Ben Tounes, Shaykh, 18–19, 21, 24,  
 37, 62, 140–141, 156  
*Advaita Vedânta*, 46, 98, 121  
 Advaitin, 82  
*afrâd*, 44, 157, 162, 163  
 African, 113  
 ‘Â’ishah, 157  
 ‘Alawî, Order, 19, 23, 158  
 ‘Alawî, Shaykh Ahmad al-, 17–20, 24, 27,  
 42, 60–62, 67, 69, 89, 140–141, 147,  
 149, 156, 161, 163  
 Algeria, 15, 17–19, 45  
 Alhambra, 147  
 ‘Ali Wafâ, 70  
 Amaterasu, 124  
 Angkor Wat, 12, 57  
 Aragon, Louis, 152  
 Arunâchala, 131, 177  
*Atmâ*, *Atman*, 74, 82, 84, 98, 112, 134,  
 150, 182  
*Avatâra*, 92, 109, 121, 167  
 Avataric, 99  
 Aymard, Jean-Baptiste, 145  
*Baghavad Gîtâ*, 7, 10, 20, 25, 66, 70, 80,  
 139  
 Bali, 57  
 Bando, Shojun, 36  
 Barks, Coleman, 182  
 Baron, Roger, 171  
 Baruzi, Jean, 154  
 Beatrice, 63  
 Béguelin, Thierry, 50  
 Benares, 16  
 Benoist, Luc, 28, 46, 149  
 Berdiaev, Nicholas, 154  
 Bergson, Henri, 26  
 Besant, Annie, x  
 Beyond-Being, 66, 84, 169  
 Biès, Jean, 43–44, 144, 149  
 Black Elk, 28, 37, 39, 40–41, 61, 83, 100,  
 147, 176  
 Black Elk, Benjamin, 28, 40, 158  
 Blavatski, Madame, x  
 Bloom, Father Anthony, 36  
*Bodhisattva*, 92  
 Boehme, Jakob, 163  
 Bonnet, Jacques, 162  
 Borella, Jean, 46, 49–50, 127, 149, 160,  
 173  
 Bousquet, Joë, 152  
 Brahimi, Denise, 166  
 Brown, Joseph Epes, 28–29, 39, 83

- Buddha, 7, 74, 83, 109, 155  
 Buddhism, 7, 29–30, 40, 75, 93, 95, 143, 515  
 Buddhist, 38, 66, 73, 92, 170  
 Burckhardt, Titus, 8–9, 17, 19–10, 22, 25, 32, 37, 39, 64, 85, 154–155, 162, 165, 170, 173, 176, 179  
 Canteins, Jean, 46, 50, 150  
 Catholic, 7, 9, 10, 39  
 Catholicism, 9, 38, 61  
 Celestine V, 57  
 Cerf, Yuan, 144  
 Charles V, 147  
 China, 16, 114  
 Chittick, William C., 177  
 Chodkiewicz, Michel, 149–150, 163, 169, 177  
 Christ, 16, 38, 82, 130–131, 133–134, 138, 143, 167  
 Christian, 29, 38, 42, 74, 82, 87, 99, 138–139, 142, 146, 154, 164, 183  
 Christianity, 15, 26, 29–30, 32, 38, 42, 61–62, 67, 76, 81, 85–86, 93, 99, 114, 133, 135  
 Chuang-tze, 83  
 Cioran, Emil, 155  
 Clavelle, Marcel, 30–32, 42, 139, 143–144  
*Connaissance de Religions*, 50, 141, 145, 158, 160  
 Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., x, 79, 143  
 Corbin, Henry, 68, 70–71, 73–74, 147–148, 156, 161, 163, 165, 168, 183  
 Cutsinger, James, 123, 150, 174  
 Cuttat, Jacques-Albert, 21, 140  
 D'Annunzio, Gabriele, 145  
 Dante, Alighieri, 114, 156, 159  
 Darqâwî, Shaykh Mulay al-'Arabî ad-, 141  
 Darqâwî Order, 18, 20  
 Davy, Marie-Madeleine, 39, 68, 154, 161  
 Dechend, Lucy von, 8–10, 16–18, 56, 58, 67, 138–139  
 Dermenghem, Emile, 20  
*dhikr*, 18, 27, 42, 62, 74, 76  
 Dionysus the Areopagite, Saint, 153  
 Eckhart, Meister, 21, 58, 66, 89, 104, 131, 140, 156, 182  
 Elijah, Elias, 44, 149, 162  
 Eliot, T. S., 29  
 Ephesus, 45  
*epignosis*, 43  
 esoteric, 63, 66–67, 70, 73, 82, 85–94, 98–100, 102–103, 105, 138, 143, 148, 161, 166, 169, 171, 174, 179  
 esoterism, 38, 46, 49, 67, 79, 81–94, 96–102, 106, 121–123, 141, 149, 162, 169–174  
 esoterist, 66, 82, 85, 105, 164  
 Eternal Feminine, 35  
*Etudes Traditionnelles*, 20, 26, 29–31, 34, 41–42, 49–50, 141, 150, 162, 183  
 Evangelical, 7  
 Evangelicalism, 138  
 Eve, 123  
*fanâ*, 16  
*faqîr*, *fuqarâ*, 37, 41, 69, 141  
*faqr*, 27, 42, 76  
 Farouq, King, 145  
 Fasi, Mohammed al-, 20  
*Fâtîhah*, 16, 87  
*fedeli d'amore*, 23, 59, 60, 71, 73, 77, 156, 159  
 Feuga, Pierre, 166  
 Fez, 22, 75  
*fitrah*, 49, 76, 86, 99, 164  
 Fitzgerald, Michael, 151, 179  
 Fools Crow, 41  
 France-Asie, 35, 40, 142  
 Freemasonry, 144  
 Garaudy, Roger, 182  
 Gauguin, Paul, 116–117  
 Gauribala, Swami, 37  
 Georgel, Gaston, 144  
 Ghazâlî, Abû Hâmid, 173  
 Ghazâlî, Ahmad, 72

- Gibb, H. R., 173  
 Gilis, Charles-André, 159  
 Gloton, Maurice, 164  
 gnosis, 38, 46, 76, 87–88, 94, 98,  
     133–135, 149, 152, 154, 160, 169  
 gnostic, 62, 74, 85, 123, 134, 153, 155  
 Goble, Paul, 40  
 Godman, David, 151  
 Gril, Denis, 149  
 Guénon, René, x, 10, 12–13, 17–18, 21,  
     23–26, 29, 30–34, 38, 50, 57, 61–63,  
     65–67, 69, 77, 79, 83, 89, 92, 97, 100,  
     103, 120, 122, 137–146, 149, 154, 158,  
     160–161, 163, 174, 176, 183  
 Guénonian, 61, 67, 120, 159, 166  
*guru*, 63, 159  
*hadīth*, 74, 108, 149, 163, 169  
  
 Hadot, Pierre, 59, 153, 155, 165  
 Hâfiz, 72  
 Haggag, Shaykh, 25  
 Hallâj, Husayn ibn Mansûr, 131  
 Hani, Jean, 49, 148  
*haqīqah*, 70, 87, 146  
 Hassan, Shaykh, 45, 150  
 Heine, Heinrich, 7  
 Hesseling, Adolphe, 158  
 Hesychasm, 170  
*Heyoka*, 176  
 Hildegard of Bingen, 68  
 Hindu, 38, 42, 57, 59, 72–73, 87, 89, 92,  
     134, 142, 160, 170, 183  
 Hinduism, 10, 22, 99, 121, 141–142, 151  
 Hisamatsu, Shinichi, 36  
  
 Ibn ‘Arabî, Muhyî al-Dîn, 23, 25, 28, 44,  
     66, 68, 72, 73, 103–105, 123, 140–141,  
     145, 149, 163, 173, 177  
 Imâmî, Seyyed Hassan, 139  
 India, 10, 17, 25, 37, 114, 120, 142  
 Indian(s), North American, 39, 40–41,  
     47, 60, 100–102, 111, 117, 119, 138,  
     148, 150, 155, 183  
 Irenaeus, Saint, 133  
 ‘Îsâ Nur al-Dîn, Shaykh, 19, 23, 60  
  
 Islam, 12, 15, 20, 29, 42, 61–62, 68, 72,  
     75–76, 81–82, 85–88, 99, 114, 123,  
     131, 139, 141, 145, 148, 167, 173,  
     176–177  
 Islamic, 26, 40, 44, 46–47, 63, 72, 76, 86,  
     87, 91, 108, 121, 131, 140, 147, 164  
 Israel, 86  
 Izard, Alphose, 19  
 Izutsu, Toshihiko, 105  
  
*Jagadguru*, 37, 147  
 Jambet, Christian, 165  
 Japan, 93, 124  
*japa-yoga*, 102, 112  
 Jenny, Johann Jakob, 11–13, 15, 56, 160  
 Jerusalem, 16  
 Jesus, 60, 75–76, 139, 167  
 Jewish, 44  
 jnanic, 61, 114  
*jñanin*, 58–59, 175  
 Jodo-Shinshu, 36  
 John, Saint, 130, 171  
 Judaism, 86, 99  
  
 Kabbalah, 108  
*karma-yoga*, 89  
 Kelly, Bernard, 34, 55  
*khalwah*, 21, 27, 36, 62, 72, 76, 142  
 Khan, Inayat, 36  
 Khayyam, ‘Umar, 74  
 Khidr, 44–45, 67–68, 70–71, 141, 149,  
     157, 162  
 Kolbe, Saint Maximilien, 166  
 Krishna Bai, 36  
 Krishna Menon, V.K., 141–142  
 Krishna, 167, 175  
 Kûry, Ernst, 15  
 Kûry, Hans, 7–10, 62, 143  
 Kwannon, 7  
  
 Lacarrière, Jacques, 154  
 Lalla Dal, Yogeshwari, 114–115, 122  
 Lamartine, Alphonse de, 145  
 Lang, Siegfried, 20  
 Laude, Patrick, 166



- Laurant, Jean-Pierre, 22, 131, 141, 144–146, 150  
 Le Saux, Henri, 36, 59, 65, 155  
*Le Voile d'Isis*, 18, 31, 140, 158, 164  
*Les Amis de l'Islam*, 19, 37  
 Levi, Eliphas, 7  
 Levy, John, 25, 141–142  
 Lhasa, 16  
 Lings, Martin, 30–34, 63, 139, 141, 143, 145, 156, 161, 172, 181  
 Lobsang Lhalungpa, 36  
*Logos*, 42  
 Lory, Pierre, 164  
 Lutheran, Lutheranism, 7  
  
 Ma Ananda Moyi, 51  
 Maharshi, Shri Ramana, 51, 83, 131, 159, 174, 177  
 Mahdi, Shaykh Hajj al-, 19, 37, 141, 147  
 Mails, Thomas E., 148  
 Maridort, Roger, 32  
 Martin, Alida, 156, 182  
 Mary, Maryam, 42, 50, 75–76, 123, 161, 162, 166, 174  
*Maryamiyyah*, *Tarîqah*, 76  
 Massignon, Louis, 20, 50, 163, 168  
 Masui, Jacques, 147  
*Mâyâ*, 66, 74, 123–124, 150, 175  
 Mecca, 16–17  
 Melchizedech, 149  
 Metatron, 162  
 Mevlevi Order, 92  
 Michon, Jean-Louis, 141  
 Milarepa, 143  
 Montherlant, Henri de, 58  
 Morocco, 36, 41, 45, 75, 139, 161  
 Morsy, Magali, 157  
 Moses, 44, 141, 149, 162–3  
 Mostaghanem, 17–24, 45, 58, 62, 67–68, 70, 139–141, 155–156, 158, 163  
 Muhammad, Prophet of Islam, 65, 77, 123, 139, 149, 157  
 Muller-Ortega, Paul Eduardo, 172  
*muqaddam*, 18–19, 21–22, 24, 26, 62, 139  
  
 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, vii, xii, 50, 80, 148, 151, 171–172  
 Needleman, Jacob, 150  
 Neoplatonist, 72  
 New Age, 83  
*nirvana*, 16  
 Northbourne, Lord, 167  
  
 Oesch, Albert, 12, 15, 16, 57  
 Ogata, Sahaku, 36  
 Oldmeadow, Kenneth, 168  
 Omar Li, Hajj, 37  
  
 Padoux, André, 157  
 Padre Pio, 151  
 Pallis, Marco, 7, 36, 38, 143, 148  
 Papus, x  
 Pascal, Blaise, 97  
 Paterson, Adrian, 25, 31  
 Paul, Saint, 66, 154  
 perennialism, 79  
 perennialist, 79, 80  
 Perry, Mark, 155  
 Peter, Saint, 130  
*philosophia perennis*, ix, x  
 Plato, 10, 66, 151, 165  
 Platonic, 63, 65, 74, 97, 107  
 Plotinus, 57–58, 72, 109, 111, 113  
 pneumatic, 57–58, 68, 77  
 Polit, Gustavo, 153  
 Pollack, Michael, 178  
 Protestantism, 10  
*Psalms*, 7  
 Pte San Win, 35, 117–118  
  
 Qâdirî Order, 25  
 Quran, 7, 12, 16, 27, 44, 60, 72–73, 87, 145, 150, 157, 162, 165, 177  
 Quranic, 49, 69  
  
 Ramachandran, Mudumbai, 38  
 Ramakrishna, 30  
 Ramdas, Swami, 36  
*religio perennis*, x, 10, 40, 42–43, 49, 76, 79, 85–86, 92–93, 102

- Revel, Jean Francois, 155  
 Rilke, Rainer-Marie, 153  
 Robin, Jean, 144  
 Rodin, Jules, 145  
 Rome, 16  
 Roumanoff, Daniel, 151  
 Rûmî, Jalâl al-Dîn, 5, 72–73  
 Rûzbihân Baqlî, 42, 68, 72–74, 76, 123, 161, 165  
  
 Sa'dî, 124  
 Said, Artebas, 19  
 Saint Point, Countess Valentine de, 145  
 Salleron, Louis, 146  
*Sanâtana Dharma*, 85, 87  
 Schaya, Leo, 10, 23, 25, 27, 33–34, 42, 44–45, 50, 109, 141, 149, 162, 179  
 Schiller, Friedrich, 7, 51  
 Schimmel, Annemarie, 148  
 Schuon, Catherine, x1, 36, 39–40, 146  
 Schuon, Erich, 5, 9  
 Schuon, Margarete, Boehler, 5, 9  
 Schuon, Paul, 5, 9  
 Sérant, Paul, 146  
 Shadhîlî Order, 18, 172  
*Shahâdah*, 17  
 Shah-Kazemi, Reza, 168  
 Shakespeare, William, 114  
*Shakti*, 101, 117, 119, 146, 166, 182–183  
 Shaktic, 120  
 Shamanic, 117  
 Shamanism, 93, 100–102, 180  
 Shamanistic, 100, 111  
 Shankaracharya, 29, 66, 134, 142–143, 146–147  
 Shastri, Hari Prasad, 36  
*Shaykh*, 63, 67–69, 130, 139, 140–141, 173  
 Shiism, 165  
 Shiite, 147–148  
 Shinto, 93  
 Shintoism, 40  
 Shiva, 90, 96, 172, 177  
 Shivaite, 37, 57, 103  
  
 Shutî, Hajj Muhammad, 16–17  
 Sigaud, Pierre-Marie, 50  
 Silesius, Angelus, 60–61, 114–115, 140, 154  
*silsilah*, 21, 24  
 Smith, Huston, xi, 2  
 Solomon, 42, 149  
*sophia perennis*, x, 33, 40, 67, 79, 121  
*Sophia*, 155  
 Sophronios, Father, 36  
 Stoddart, William, 153  
 Sufi, 17, 38, 40, 42, 46, 60, 68, 72, 103, 105, 115, 141, 160, 162, 164, 172  
 Sufism, 17, 46, 61–62, 70, 86, 123, 149, 156, 179  
 Suhrawardî, Shaykh al-Ischrâq Yahyâ, 70  
 Sun Dance, 40–41  
 Sunnism, 165  
 Symeon the New Theologian, 162  
  
*tantra*, 121  
 Taoism, 98  
 Taoist, 144  
*tarîqah*, 17–20, 32, 37, 40, 67, 141  
 Tauler, 140  
 Theresa of Avila, Saint, 151  
 Theresa of the Child Jesus, Saint, 154  
 Thibon, Gustave, 52, 138, 152, 159  
 Tibet, 36  
 Tijânî Order, 37  
 Townsend, Peter, 143  
 Turkey, 42  
  
*upâya*, 85, 87  
  
 Valentinus, 57, 153–154  
 Valsân, Michel, 23–28, 32–34, 67, 70, 141, 145–146, 161  
 Van Gogh, Vincent, 116  
 Vedanta, 10, 12, 16, 34  
 Vedantic, 59, 60, 66–67  
*Vedas*, 7, 175  
 Virgin, Holy, Blessed, 9, 38, 41–42, 45, 60, 74–75, 117, 121, 124, 134, 179  
 Vishnu, 167

Vitray-Meyerovitch, Eva de, 167

Vivekananda, 30

Wafi, Shaykh al-, 36

Wurstemberger, Guy de, 39

Yellowtail, Thomas, 39–40, 47, 50

ying-yang, 2, 83, 117, 165, 174

yoga, 40

Zaehner, R. C., xi

zâwiyah, 16–17, 45, 69, 75, 139

Zen, 36, 40, 91

Ziegler, Leopold, 20